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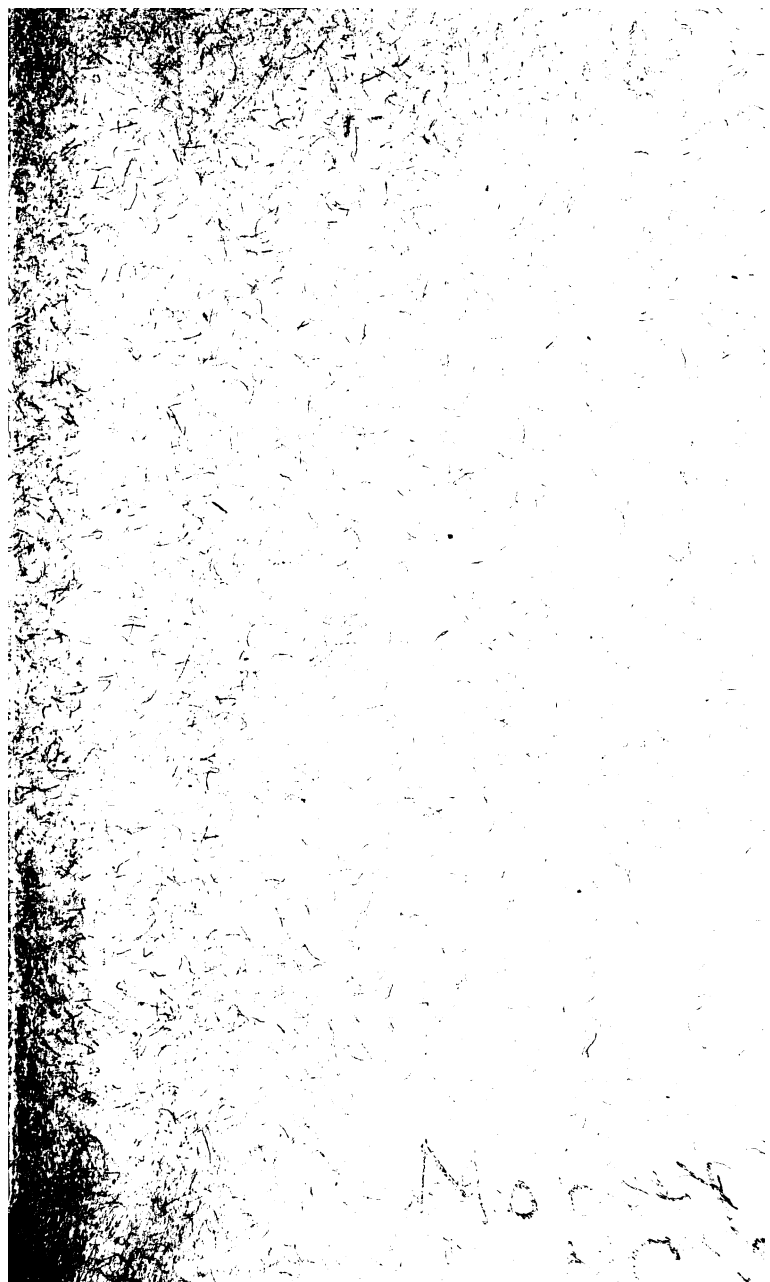
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THROSTLETHWAITE.

BY

SUSAN MORLEY,
AUTHOR OF "AILEEN FERRERS."

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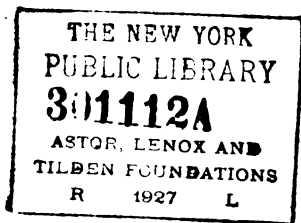
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THROSTLETHWAITE.

CHAPTER I.

It was a fine afternoon towards the end of April,—one of those days so soft and warm and brilliant that all the experience of past springs scarcely makes it possible to believe that summer has not really begun, and that another day or two will probably bring back piercing east winds, with showers of sleet in the valleys, and white caps on the mountains. A garden-chair, which was in fact an invalid-couch on wheels, stood on the sunny terrace in front of the drawing-room windows at Throstlethwaite. A boy of eighteen was reclining in it.

“How delicious this is, mother!” he said, as he turned towards the lady standing by him. “If this weather would only last, so that I could live out of doors, I should be all right again in no time!”

“The air is very good for you,” replied his mother, as she stooped to arrange the cushions which supported him and the plaids which covered him; “but don’t be tempted to be imprudent, Frank. Keep out of the wind and in the sun; and don’t stay so long as to be tired.”

Frank L’Estrange laughed. “You may trust Daniel for that, mother, if you can’t trust me. He’s grown the stupidest old coddle in existence, and never lets me have my own way one bit. He’s mean enough to like making me feel that I’m under his thumb, now!”

The elderly man who stood waiting to draw the chair answered, with imperturbable gravity, "Turn about's fair play, Mr. Frank! You've led me a fine dance many a time when you were a little chap; but now, till you're strong again, you've just got to come home when I fetch you, and that'll be when I think missis wishes."

Frank laughed again,—the joyous laugh which in past days had always been the sweetest music to his mother's ears, but which now gave her a sharp pang of pain.

She was a widow, he was her only child, and every one but himself knew that the days for which she could hope to keep him with her must be few. This apparent rally did not deceive her: it brought no renewal of hope, but rather a re-awakening of the keen anguish through which she had passed when first she had realized that she must lose him, and which she had forcibly suppressed, lest the perception of it should cloud his remaining months of life.

Now, for a single moment, she turned away, that he might not see her face, but the next restored her self-command.

"That is right, Daniel. Take care of him, and bring him home in good time," she said, with a kindly, grateful smile to the old man.

She knew by instinct that no heart was in such true sympathy with hers as that of old Daniel Fisher. Many friends were kind, were sincerely fond of Frank, and truly sorry for her; but to no one, save to herself and this old man, was the dying boy the one object of exclusive affection, the one absorbing joy, which must be resigned in obedience to a resistless fate.

She valued at its true worth the almost womanly tenderness and tact which enabled her often to trust Frank to Daniel's care knowing that it would be as minute as her

own, and that it was even less likely to be rebelled against, because submission to it was voluntary, and rather an amusement than a duty.

"Now, then, Daniel, go ahead," cried Frank, "or else we shall be expected back before we start!"

Daniel looked at his mistress.

"We are going down to the lake-side, ma'am, for Mr. Frank to see the men doing up the boats. It's nice and sunny down there, and sheltered, too, by Riddell's Wood, where they're bark-peeling."

Mrs. L'Estrange nodded in approval, and went into the house.

Daniel proceeded to draw Frank's chair towards the lake, which was only a short distance from the terrace. They had not gone far, when a sound of wheels was heard on the drive at the other side of the house.

"It's Joe, sir, going with the dog-cart to the station for Mr. Leonard," said Daniel, looking round.

"He is early," said Frank, taking out his watch. "He'll have a long wait, even if the train is punctual."

"Ay, he will that!" replied Daniel, whose homely speech was always infinitely broader when he was alone with his young master than he allowed it to be when talking to his mistress. "And Joe's not often that keen o' bein' afore his time, neither. But t' inn and t' station's very nigh hand one another, and *that's* what's waked him up."

"Well, Daniel, Joe isn't the only man I know who likes a crack at the 'Otter.'"

"There's cracks and cracks, Mr. Frank. I thinks nowt on a chap that doesn't like a glass and a bit cheerful company over his pipe of a night. But it's Polly Nixon that Joe's after,—silly lad! She's a sort that wants a deal o' keepin' together, more especial on Saturday

afternoons, and waitin' at Otter's Bridge Station for Mr. Leonard comes in handy for seein' what tricks she's up to with all the market-folk."

Frank laughed.

"Polly Nixon is very pretty; but if I were Joe I think I would rather have a sweetheart who didn't want quite such sharp looking after."

"There's more maks o' love than one, Mr. Frank, same as there is o' most things. Some lads likes an upsettin', flighty sort of a lass, that keeps them always in a worry, and hasn't a notion how to behave hersel'; and some likes the quiet, meek sort, that takes every word they say for gospel; and just one here and there has the sense to go after one that's summat like t' makin' of a decent woman!"

Frank could not talk much, but he could say enough to make Daniel go on, which was what amused him.

"People must choose for themselves, you see, Daniel," was all he said.

"Choose for theirsels!" growled Daniel. "In course you can't hinder them; but they might just as well toss up, for any sense they've got to choose! Folks mostly sorts theirsels crossways. Look at my Joe there. He's not to say a bad lad, and not so daft as most; but he's fairly crazed about yon idle, feckless lass; while there's little Dinah Hodgson would be just the very thing for him, and he'll not hear tell of her!"

"I dare say it will never come to anything with Polly," suggested Frank, by way of consolation.

"M'appen it mayn't sir, but m'appen it may; and if it does, a nice life she'll lead him, as I've telled him many a time. But says he, only last night, 'I'd liefer have Polly, let her plague me ever so, father, than any other lass. It's her or none.'"

"Well, that's true romance, Daniel! And what did *you* say, then?"

"Says I, 'Thou'rt a real big fool, Joe; but thou mun please theesel, and it's thee, not me, as'll have to rue.'"

By this time they had reached the lake, and Daniel drew up the chair into a sunny, sheltered corner, between the boat-house and Riddell's Wood, from which Frank could see all that was going on in both places, besides having a splendid view of lake and mountains; for Throstlethwaite stood at the foot of Brideswater, one of the least known of the lakes of the North of England.

Stretching down towards the open, level country between the mountain district and the sea, the hills on its shores, especially towards the lower end, were somewhat less bold in outline, as well as less precipitous and craggy, than many of their more famous rivals; but this slightly tamer character of its loveliness had one compensating advantage,—Brideswater was seldom (almost never) visited by tourists, and the few residents on its banks could enjoy its beauty in undisturbed privacy and quiet.

On the western side, low wooded hills came down close to the shore, leaving space only for a road, and, of late years, for a railroad. The little station of Otter's Bridge was at the foot of the lake on this side, and was immediately opposite to Throstlethwaite. On the eastern side of the lake, the mountains, though higher and bolder, gradually receded entirely from it, leaving a wide space of valley. Throstlethwaite was thus almost in the open low country, though commanding a splendid distant view of some of the highest mountains in the district, as their crags rose one behind another in picturesque groups beyond the head of the lake.

Frank L'Estrange, boy like, at first derived more con-

scious pleasure from seeing active work going on than from the beauty of the scenery. He watched with interest the progress of a carpenter and painter who were employed in doing up the boats for the summer. He even gave them some directions, and he was amused by looking at a picturesque group of bark-peelers who were at work near the edge of the copse called Riddell's Wood. He knew every man, woman, and child in the village of St. Bride's, which was very near his home; and he was popular among them, as any good-looking, spirited boy with frank, courteous manners and a kindly nature is sure to be, especially when he is the last of an old family and the heir to a fine property. But after a few friendly words to one or two of those who were nearest to him he grew tired, and lay back idly in his chair, dreaming pleasant waking dreams of future health and strength (such as had been his until a few months ago) to the accompaniment of the gentle, murmuring splash of the tiny waves of the lake against the wall of the little boat-house cove and pier. He was placed so as to look towards the bridge—known as Otter's Bridge—which crossed the river where it issued from the lake, and he was watching for the first sight of the white column of steam coming round the corner of the hill, which would mark the approach of the train bringing his cousin, Leonard Barrington, to stay over Sunday at Throstlethwaite.

Daniel, who had been standing where he could see right up the lake, now came back to the chair.

"Here's one of the Monksholme boats coming round Ashness Point, Mr. Frank. It'll be Miss Ruth, I think."

Frank was roused to instant animation.

"Miss Ruth, is it? Oh, I'm so glad! I like to have her when Mr. Leonard's here: they amuse me."

Daniel growled.

"I'd a deal sooner see her keep out of his way. That's another crossways sort of a business, to my mind."

"That? What?" said Frank.

"Well, they've got it all up and down that it's all settled 'twixt her and him; and what good's the likes of him for such as her, I'd like to know?"

Frank laughed merrily.

"What preposterous nonsense! I hope they have also arranged 'all up and down' how Mr. Leonard is to contrive to keep a wife."

The boy's utter unconsciousness of what public gossip *had* arranged in the matter was too much for old Daniel. He felt a mist before his eyes, and a choking in his throat, and, muttering something, of which Frank only caught "a real bad job, anyway," he abruptly moved away and went down to the landing-place.

The boat, in which a young lady was rowing herself, was now very near. With a few quick, skillful strokes she guided it unerringly into the little harbor; then, as Daniel took hold of it and steadied it, she sprang lightly out, and, giving the old man a bright, cordial greeting as she passed, hurried across the grass to Frank's chair.

Ruth Charteris was evidently a frequent and a welcome visitor. Frank seized upon her as he might upon a favorite elder sister.

"How jolly of you to come, after all, Ruth! And *what* a day! isn't it?"

"Delicious!" Ruth answered. "I was so glad to see your chair down here."

"I shall be well in no time if this weather lasts," said Frank. "All I want is lots of fresh air. I thought you couldn't come to-day, though?"

"Nor could I, but for this sudden burst of summer. I knew that all the available force of our stable would

have to go up to Thornbeck to meet the Kennedys, so that I could have no one to ride with me, and I had not thought of its being fine enough for the lake."

"There's the train," cried Frank. "Now, Daniel, we'll start and meet Leonard at the Lodge. Two bits of unexpected luck for me to-day, Ruth, for Leonard did not think he would be able to come, any more than you. We only knew this morning."

Daniel's gossip had excited Frank's curiosity, and he looked at Ruth as he spoke; but, as she had stooped to gather some primroses, and he could not see her face, he was obliged to content himself with resolving to observe her later, when Leonard also would be there. The next moment they met Mrs. L'Estrange coming to look after Frank. She welcomed Ruth affectionately, and they all walked on together to the Lodge, which they reached at the same time as the dog-cart coming from Otter's Bridge. Leonard Barrington, who was driving, threw the reins to Joe Fisher, and, jumping out, joined the rest of the party. Frank watched him as he spoke first to Mrs. L'Estrange and Ruth, and then to himself, and afterwards walked on with his aunt, leaving Ruth to follow in attendance on the chair. It was all done with a bright, easy grace which was very attractive, and Frank in his own mind decided that the match which Daniel had announced as having been arranged by public opinion at St. Bride's was unquestionably a very suitable one. Leonard Barrington was five-and-twenty, well-born, good-looking, clever, and pleasant; Ruth Charteris was three years younger, and in Frank's opinion (which was very generally shared) was "out and out the prettiest and jolliest girl in the county." Nothing could be more natural than that they should like each other; and (putting aside the fact that there would be hardly anything for them to live upon) Frank con-

cluded that nothing could be more desirable than their marriage. It would be very nice to have Ruth for a cousin, so without further consideration he gave his consent, and was quietly amused by the black looks with which old Daniel, with whom Ruth was a great favorite, and who had never liked Leonard, was evidently considering the same question.

"What's the joke, Frank?" asked Ruth, at last, tired of walking beside him in silence.

"You'll only be savage if I tell you," replied Frank, looking up at her with a mischievous smile, and then glancing demurely at Leonard, who was walking in front of them with Mrs. L'Estrange.

"Then don't tell me; I am not curious," answered Ruth, quickly. But, though she laughed, she blushed, and Frank, satisfied by her instant consciousness that there was some ground for the report, magnanimously resolved not to tease her, but to amuse himself by discussing the affair afterwards with his mother. Ruth, to avoid all chance of a renewal of such hints, began to talk about some wild ducks' nests which had lately been found in a stream near Monksholme. Daniel, of course, joined in the conversation on such a subject; and, as he had various stories to tell of his own experiences in early days, when his object was first to find such nests and then to prevent the gamekeepers from sharing his knowledge, Frank was kept well amused until they reached the house. Neither Frank nor Ruth quite believed all the stories which the old coachman had been in the habit of telling them from their babyhood, but they liked nothing better than drawing him out, and both thoroughly appreciated the shrewd sense and dry humor which were his strong characteristics. They loved him for his warm-hearted faithfulness and unswerving integrity, and found unceasing amusement in

his obstinate prejudices and his invariable tendency to cry down all young people and every new idea.

When the chair reached the hall door, Leonard came to offer his help to Frank in getting out, and the boy naturally continued to lean upon him as he went into the house. Mrs. L'Estrange followed them. Ruth Charteris lingered for a moment to say to Daniel, "How much better he seems to-day!—so much stronger! After all, perhaps the summer may cure him, in spite of all the doctors say."

"He'll not be here for t' summer to have a chance, Miss Ruth," replied the old man, sadly.

"I cannot bear to think it," said Ruth, passionately, with sudden tears in her eyes. "What will his mother do without him? I cannot conceive Throstlethwaite without him; and he is quite different to-day from what he has been for months."

"Ay! but a change so sudden-like isn't to hold by," was Daniel's wiser answer. "He'll not be here long, Miss Ruth; and, though t' missis has a brave spirit, it'll just be half hersel' she'll bury when she buries him. Eh! well! we mun just do as we can when he's gone."

Ruth spoke through blinding tears.

"I shall try to hope while I can, Daniel, for her and for us all," she said, as she turned away.

Daniel looked after her.

"*She's* not reckonin' on comin' after him," he muttered. "But why t' Lord should be pleased to tak' him and leave t'other one and give him t' property and yon fine lass for a wife, I'se fairly bet to think. *She's* a sight ower good for him, anyway; but if he's to be master here, it'll be a good job for them as lives to see it, for her to be missis!"

After which expression of opinion Daniel retired to his own domains.

CHAPTER II.

THE long, low drawing-room at Throstlethwaite looked very bright and comfortable when Ruth entered it that afternoon. It had three windows opening on the terrace, from which a broad grassy glade of the park sloped down to the boat-house, so that the room commanded a beautiful view.

The afternoon sunshine lighted up the old family pictures on the walls; the old cabinets and china contrasted picturesquely with every modern luxury, in the way of sofas and easy-chairs; a cheerful profusion of books and newspapers covered the tables, and there were stands of hothouse flowers; a bright wood fire was blazing in the grate, one window was open, and the air was warm and fresh and perfumed.

Frank was established on a couch near the fire, between it and one of the windows; Mrs. L'Estrange was busy making the afternoon tea, and Leonard was waiting to help her with the kettle, which was singing on its stand by the fire. Ruth dropped into a low chair close by Frank's sofa, and his little pet dog instantly jumped into her lap.

"Why didn't you bring Quiz this afternoon?" said Frank, stretching out a hand to pull Tiny's long silky ears.

"Quiz and I had quite a romantic adventure," said Ruth, "but for which we should both have been here more than an hour earlier than I arrived. I set off directly after luncheon, but the little wretch was willful

and disobedient, and while I was getting the boat ready he *would* go off after rabbits in the wood."

"I know," said Frank. "He never *can* resist those tempting holes in Hazel Bank."

"Exactly. Well, when I was ready to start, I called and I whistled, but no Quiz appeared; and when I went back into the wood there was not a trace of him. A gentleman (evidently a stray laker), who had been sketching, I think, came up to me and said that he had seen my little dog disappear into one of the holes in the bank. When we went to it we could hear a faint yelping and scuffling under ground, and a heap of freshly-fallen earth showed what had happened. Quiz had gone in, and the hole had been stopped behind him by a landslip on a small scale. The stranger was very good-natured, and very efficient too. Luckily there were some slates lying not far off, where the men had been doing something to the mouth of a drain, so we each took one by way of a spade, and worked away vigorously, just as if he had been one of the boys, till we got the hole opened and pulled Quiz out. But, in his frantic efforts to help himself out, the little beast had sprained his shoulder and could hardly crawl, so my new friend kindly volunteered to carry him up to the house for me, saying that he was too heavy, and too dirty, with all the damp soil sticking to him, for me to do it myself."

"I should think you almost forgave him for being there at all, in consideration of his usefulness in the emergency?" said Leonard, as he brought her some tea.

Ruth smiled. "Quite! We had worked away together with such good will that I never thought about his being a stranger, and forgot to resent his intrusion. But when we had made poor little Quiz over to Michael's care, and there was nothing more to be done, I suddenly remem-

bered how odd it all was, and recovered my manners. The result, however, was only to make *him* turn quite shy, and, after having been so very easy and intimate for half an hour, the sudden change was really too absurd. I asked him if he had had any luncheon, but he instantly said that he did not want any, and that he had not a minute to spare, as he must be at Thornbeck in time for the four-o'clock train; he had been walking round the lake, and had got into our woods by mistake, hoping to find a shorter path than the high-road. It was three then, and quite absurd for him to think of walking five miles in a short hour; but, though it was all Quiz's fault, it was not so easy to help him. The carriage had started, though mamma was only going to meet the late train, because she had several things to do in the town, and some visits to pay; and the luggage-cart was gone too, for no earthly reason but because the men like being in Thornbeck on a Saturday."

"You didn't offer him Zoe!" cried Frank.

Ruth shook her head with a smile.

"No, Frank. My gratitude, though great, was not up to the point of letting an unknown laker mount Zoe. But a brilliant idea occurred to me, and I suggested taking him across the lake at once. I said that I was going on the lake at any rate,—it would only take half an hour to go straight across, and then he could easily catch the train at the Carlsgill station. He agreed to this, and we went down to the lake together again."

"The train was so late that he would have had ample time to walk to Thornbeck," said Leonard, with evident disapprobation.

"But we could not possibly know that," said Ruth. "When we got to the boat-house, and I loosed the chain which I had just thrown over a post when I went to hunt

for Quiz, I saw that he looked about rather puzzled, as if he were waiting for something, so I observed that I didn't think we had much time to spare. Then he said he was afraid he must have misled me into thinking he could row, as he saw that I had brought no boatman. Of course I told him that didn't matter in the least, but that he had better be quick and get in; so we set off for Carlsgill landing."

"But, my dear Ruth, was not that rather a strong measure?" said Mrs. L'Estrange.

Ruth colored, but answered, frankly,—

"I suppose it was, rather; but, you see, till we were fairly off, I never thought of anything but that he had wasted his time and risked losing his train in order to help me, and that it was my business to see that he caught it, after all, if possible."

"Never mind the proprieties, mother," interrupted Frank. "I want to hear the end of the story. It must have been a fine lark for him, sitting there with you rowing for your life to catch his train! I hope he appreciated the situation."

Ruth laughed merrily.

"My dear Frank, he *hated* it. I could see that it was horrible to him to sit there useless and helpless and let me row him: 'the situation,' as you call it, was so intolerable to him that he could scarcely keep up the conversation politeness demanded; and it was altogether so ridiculous and uncomfortable that I was very glad when I had disposed of him at Carlsgill, and had the boat to myself, and could laugh at my leisure."

Frank, amused at Leonard's evident annoyance as he listened to Ruth's account of her somewhat unconventional proceedings, continued to ask questions.

"And what was the hero of the adventure like, Ruth?

Of course he will turn up promiscuously on some future occasion, so it is important to know. Was he good-looking? Young, or old? Tall, or short? Dark, or fair? And was he a prince in disguise, do you think, or a humble adventurer born to good luck, and thus thrown in the way of the fairy princess whose influence will lead him to achieve greatness?"

It was long since Frank had been in such good spirits, or had seemed strong enough to talk so much, and Ruth gladly answered him in the same tone.

"Young,—but not too young; a *man*,—not a *boy*, Frank! Tall, and big, and strong; decidedly good-looking,—after rather a plain fashion; neither dark nor fair, but a good respectable sort of brown; and, except that he had a particularly pleasant voice, I think that is about all I can tell you."

"Didn't you find out his name?"

"No. I thought I should like to know; but, as he did not ask mine, I let it alone."

"How stupid of you! Was he a gentleman?"

"Yes, you inquisitive boy, *quite*: at least——"

"At least—" mimicked Frank. "Well, Ruth?"

Ruth hesitated a little.

"I only meant that though in appearance and voice and manner, and in everything he said and did, or didn't say and do, he was quite like a well-bred, well-educated man, I don't think he *was* quite like the idle sort of gentlemen we are chiefly accustomed to. As long as there was anything to do, he was all right; but as soon as there was nothing but manner wanted, he did not seem to have it at command. He was not at ease enough to carry off the 'situation' as Edgar or Oswald would have done, or the Allonbys or Merediths. That was all."

"Couldn't flirt gracefully off-hand, in fact, like Edgar;

or, better still, if present company were not always excepted, like Leonard there. Well, I hope he will turn up again: don't you, mother?"

Mrs. L'Estrange did not answer, and Ruth turned to her with the frank appeal, "I see you are blaming me, Mrs. L'Estrange. You think I was wrong?"

"Only a little indiscreet, my dear. As it turned out, it all ended well; but was not a *tête-à-tête* row across the lake with a perfect stranger rather daring?"

"Of course it would not have done if he had not been—but really if one were always to wait to consider every possible objection, one would never be of any use. If one makes a mistake on the side of rashness there is sure to be time enough to regret it, but if one is over-cautious the chance of helping is lost for good and all."

Mrs. L'Estrange smiled. "A kind theory, Ruth, at any rate, and I think your instinct is to be trusted to prevent you from ever being really imprudent. Still, dear child, I scarcely fancy your mother would quite approve of this afternoon's proceedings. Such little things give rise to gossip."

"There were only the fishes to see and report," replied Ruth. "However, mamma will not like it, I know; and I am sorry to have to tell tales of myself this evening, just when the Kennedys have come."

"Ah, yes," said Mrs. L'Estrange. "You expect Agatha and her husband and children this evening. It must seem strange to her coming home for the first time since her marriage six years ago. You will enjoy having them for the summer."

"I wish we could have had Agatha and the babies without Colonel Kennedy," said Ruth. "He is an alarming idea; and we shall not have one of the boys at home to help, for ever so long."

"You will like him when you know him," said Mrs. L'Estrange. "You were too much of a child when Agatha married to know him at all; but I remember thinking him remarkably pleasant the few times I met him."

"Oh, I dare say we shall do very well in time," replied Ruth. "But I must confess to having rather a dread of a 'perfect stranger' in the position of a brother, though I didn't mind rowing one across the lake."

After this, the conversation drifted easily into a discussion of various local topics, during which Frank, who was tired with his previous exertions, was a silent listener, while Leonard, apparently recovering his good humor, joined in it pleasantly enough.

At length Ruth rose, saying that it was quite time for her to be going home, and she took leave of Mrs. L'Estrange and Frank. That Leonard should walk down to the lake with her was such an obvious act of necessary courtesy that Mrs. L'Estrange scarcely remarked his doing so, and she was utterly taken by surprise when Frank, raising himself on his couch to watch the two figures crossing the lawn, said, with a smile, "Do you think that will really come to anything, mother?"

"My dear boy! what could put such an idea into your head?"

Frank laughed. "Most of my ideas come from Daniel, I think, mother. It had never occurred to me till the afternoon, when he (who, by the way, disapproves strong) said that it was 'all up and down' that it was a settle thing. I asked him how people imagined that Leonard could keep a wife; but he only growled out something about its being 'a real bad job;' and, as Ruth arrived at the moment, I had no chance of further information. Seeing them now by the light of Daniel's wisdom, I think there *is* something in it; and it would be a capital

thing,—if only one could see how it was ever to come off.”

“They are old friends and playfellows,” replied Mrs. L’Estrange, “and the gossip of a country village is easily excited. Of course it would be absurd for Leonard to think of such a thing.”

“I suppose so,” said Frank. “But if they both wish it, mother, it would be such a charming match! I hope *something* will turn up to make it possible. Don’t you?”

“I think that if you mean to be able to enjoy Leonard’s company this evening you must not talk any more now, but be left to rest till dinner-time,” said his mother, bending over him and arranging his pillows. “I am going out for a little while into the garden. Lie down, my darling, and try to sleep.”

He was tired enough to obey quietly; and in another moment she had left the room by the open window, which she closed behind her, and was alone upon the terrace. She felt that she could not have maintained her self-command any longer.

Mrs. L’Estrange had herself been the heiress of Throstlethwaite, and was the last representative of one of the oldest families in the county. The estate was large and unincumbered, but, as much of the land was mountain and wood, the rent-roll was comparatively small, and scarcely equal, in these modern days, to maintaining the traditional position of the family. Still, it was a handsome property, and Margaret L’Estrange was a very considerable heiress. At eight-and-twenty she married Captain Barrington with her father’s full approbation, and the marriage proved a happy one. Old Mr. L’Estrange survived it for three years, long enough to rejoice at the birth of his grandson. After his death, Captain Barrington (who had taken his wife’s name) sold out of the army,

and the Barrington L'Estranges, as they were then called, lived at Throstlethwaite, generally liked and respected. When Frank, who had remained the only child, was about thirteen, his father died. Not long afterwards, iron was found on an outlying farm belonging to the property, but quite detached from it, and some miles nearer to the sea. The consequent increase of fortune was great, and Mrs. L'Estrange, who was an admirable woman of business, rejoiced over it for Frank's sake. It would give him ample means to take the position in the county which ought to be his, and for which she had unceasingly labored to train him. The gradual perception that all her bright hopes must be abandoned, and that her darling was to be taken from her in the fullness of his youth and strength, had been one of the hardest trials that could have been imposed upon her. It had been borne with unflinching and unselfish courage; but of the many dark hours through which she had struggled in lonely misery during the past winter and spring, the present one was perhaps the darkest and the hardest, as it was certainly the most unexpected.

Leonard Barrington was the eldest child of her husband's only brother. This brother had died two years after her own marriage, leaving a widow and several children almost totally unprovided for. Mrs. Charles Barrington came with her children to live at a small cottage in Lingdale, about eight miles from Throstlethwaite; and Leonard, who was his uncle's godson, had been almost adopted by the L'Estranges. He was educated at their expense, always spent most of his holidays with them, and was quite like a son of the house.

At the time of his uncle's death he was still at Oxford, where he had been sent with the intention of his eventually taking orders and being provided for by the living

of St. Bride's, which was in Mrs. L'Estrange's gift. The next twelve months, however, proved that he had no real inclination to become a clergyman, and was by no means fitted for it: so that the idea was given up.

Leonard was popular, and perhaps deservedly so, for he could make himself very pleasant; but, though clever enough, he was idle and fond of amusement, and far from sufficiently impressed with the necessity of hard and steady work if he were to get on in the world. He tried for one or two appointments under Government, but failed in the preliminary competitive examinations.

Disappointed and rather provoked, Mrs. L'Estrange sent him into a house of business at Hamburg. A school-friend of hers had married a rich merchant there, and Leonard was taken into his office.

For two years he remained there obediently, and no complaints of him were made by his employers, but he openly professed to dislike the kind of work, and was not likely to do much good there.

An opening for his return to England had offered itself about nine months before the present time.

Messrs. Nichols and Brandon, the principal bankers in the county town of Edenford, wanted a clerk as foreign correspondent. Leonard was a good linguist, he must have acquired some knowledge of business, and to oblige Mrs. L'Estrange they agreed to try him.

He was delighted to return to England, and to be again within reach of the amusements and society he liked; he was always sanguine about work of a new kind, and he eagerly accepted the offered post.

He lived, of course, at Edenford, but was again very often at Throstlethwaite and Monksholme. Frank was fond of him, and so, in spite of all his faults, was Mrs. L'Estrange; and, as Throstlethwaite was a home much

more to his taste than Kilhowe, his mother's cottage in Lingdale, he was there as much as possible.

Frank's illness had begun in November, and Mrs. L'Es-trange, entirely absorbed in him, and in the conquest of herself for his sake, had never bestowed even a passing thought on the probability of an attachment between Leonard Barrington and Ruth Charteris.

Now she suddenly realized it all with sharp and bitter pain,—with a momentary fierce rebellion against the fate which was trying her so hardly. Nothing could be more natural than that two young people should fall in love, however wildly imprudent such a proceeding might be ; but in such a case as this, friends would certainly have endeavored to keep them apart, had not every one of course assumed that Leonard before long would take Frank's place in the world.

The idea of the probable consequences of her boy's death being thus calculated and speculated upon was torture to her. As her eyes followed the boat now pushing out from the Throstlethwaite Cove, she felt something almost like passionate hatred of the two whose happiness was thus to grow out of her misery. Did the law that one existence must prey upon another hold good in the moral as well as in the physical world? Why should the joy be taken away from her life in order to secure their happiness?

They were young, no doubt, and she was not, but they could not be to each other what Frank was to her. If fate separated them now, it could be but a passing sorrow : life would bring to them other interests, other affections as strong and absorbing, other joys as great ; while what could the future hold for her in this world, when she should be childless as well as widowed, except the hope of leaving it?

Leonard was rowing the boat, while Ruth steered. He would probably row her up to Monksholme and walk back before dinner. They were happy and joyous in each other's society, heedless of her sorrow, thinking of its cause only as an unexpected turn of fortune's wheel in their own favor, and meeting each other more constantly than they could otherwise have done, under cover of their visits to the dying boy. As she watched the boat, she seemed to feel each dip of the oars into the water like a blow causing actual physical pain. It all seemed so selfish, so heartless, so brutal !

But with that climax, as the boat passed out of sight round the wooded point of Ashness, there came a sudden revulsion of feeling, and she saw her own injustice.

That public gossip, both high and low, should speculate as to what would follow Frank's death was a matter of course ; that Mrs. Charteris should so far take it into consideration as to delay putting a stop to an intimacy which under other circumstances she would have thought it imprudent to allow, was probable enough, and only natural ; while Mr. Charteris, after the manner of busy elderly men, had probably never thought of the matter as one concerning his daughter at all. That Leonard himself should think of it was perhaps pardonable,—was certainly probable ; for, with all his pleasantness and his many attractive qualities, his aunt knew that his nature was neither high-toned nor unselfish.

But Ruth ? Mrs. L'Estrange recalled her thoughts of Ruth with a keen sense of shame and self-reproach. Ruth Charteris was dearer to her than anything but Frank and the memory of the dead ; she had known her from her birth, and had always loved her dearly, and she now sincerely regretted having allowed herself even for a moment to doubt her truth, her affection, or her delicacy of feel-

ing. Ruth might or might not be unconsciously learning to love Leonard, but she was utterly incapable of speculating upon the chances of his succeeding Frank as the heir of Throstlethwaite, or of having a double motive for the constant visits which were one of the poor boy's greatest pleasures.

Then came the recollection that Leonard was not at all necessarily her heir. She had no relations of her own except very distant cousins on her mother's side, with whom she had little acquaintance, and who had no claim upon the L'Estrange property. After Frank's death it would be completely in her own power, and it was thus not unnatural that it should be assumed that she would make Leonard Barrington her heir; but whether she should do so or not must be a question for future thought.

Was he fitted for such a trust! Was he worthy to marry Ruth Charteris?

For the present, however, all such considerations must be put aside. She could not think dispassionately. While Frank lived, all her strength must be given to her care of him; when he was gone—But that was a thought she could not face at present; and she hastily left the terrace, and turned her steps towards the village, where she had some business.

That half-hour's struggle with herself had tried her strength severely, but she felt that rest was impossible, and that only by forcibly turning her thoughts into some other channel could she enable herself to meet Frank and Leonard at dinner with the apparent quiet cheerfulness that was necessary.

CHAPTER III.

RUTH CHARTERIS was the younger of the two daughters of Mr. Charteris of Monksholme, a pretty and pleasant place at the upper end of the lake of Brideswater, and, like Throstlethwaite, on the eastern side.

These were the only houses of any importance on the lake, and they were more than three miles apart by road, though by water the distance was considerably less. It was generally believed that Monksholme must have been built on the site of an old monastery; but no trace of any such building existed, except the name of the field, and the fact that the little parish church of St. Bride's was close to it, while it was at least two miles, even by the fields, from the village.

The grandfather of the present owner was one of the many younger sons of a long-established family, of some consequence in a neighboring county. He married a woman of considerable fortune; and, as both he and his wife took a fancy to the situation of Monksholme, they bought the property, built a good modern house upon it, and settled there.

Neither Monksholme nor Throstlethwaite had any other neighbors of the same position in the world so near to them, and most fortunately the two families in each succeeding generation had been on terms of warm and intimate friendship.

The present Mr. Charteris, like Margaret L'Estrange, was an only child, and, though he was twelve years older than she was, they had been much together in early days;

for his mother was very fond of her, and she was often at Monksholme. The friendship between the two houses had continued unbroken up to the present time, and, as a natural consequence, Leonard Barrington and Frank L'Estrange had each found companions among the numerous children at Monksholme.

Agatha Charteris, who was the eldest, was three years older than Leonard, and had very early considered herself too womanly to join in the amusements which he shared with her two brothers Edgar and Oswald. Ruth was next to Oswald, and was six years younger than Agatha. After her came three more boys, who were Frank's playfellows.

Agatha was a young lady in society while her sister was still a child, and was married before Ruth left the school-room, so that she was naturally thrown upon her brothers for companionship. She was equally welcome to both the elder and younger divisions, for she had just the gifts which brothers most appreciate. She was pretty and sweet-tempered, and she had health and spirits which made her, without being the least unfeminine, ready to join in most of their amusements. She was never in their way, and was often helpful.

The possibly inconvenient result of so great an intimacy with Leonard Barrington was, as is usually the case in such circumstances, never thought of until too late.

After Ruth left the school-room, Mrs. Charteris would probably have begun to be more prudent; but during the first three years after that time Leonard was scarcely ever in the neighborhood, and it was not until he had come to Edenford the previous summer that any need for caution had suggested itself. Mrs. Charteris had then very quickly perceived that it would not do at all to allow her pretty, lively, popular daughter to be on terms of sisterly inti-

macy with a handsome, attractive man of five-and-twenty who was no relation to her ; especially when she considered that he had no fortune whatever, and seemed particularly unlikely ever to make one. It was altogether awkward and puzzling.

Leonard was not only very often at Throstlethwaite, whence he could come to Monksholme as much as he liked, but, being well-connected, good-looking, and pleasant, he was in great request in the society of the county. He was always a useful and welcome addition to a party, and was consequently to be met with everywhere, there being in general rather a dearth of young men. Mrs. Charteris certainly felt herself in a troublesome dilemma, in which she could hope for no help from any one. It was not by any means an easy case to deal with. Leonard could not be said to flirt with Ruth, nor even to pay her any conspicuous attention, and Mr. Charteris would be certain to ridicule the idea of there being any need for caution, and to look upon any attempt to keep him at a distance not only as unfriendly, but as absurd and undignified ; while any hint of warning to Ruth herself might only make matters worse, and perhaps even create the evil which her mother was wishing to avert. The only thing that Mrs. Charteris could do, she did promptly. She sent Ruth from home for a few weeks in the autumn, to pay some visits, trusting that, in the winter, short days and bad weather might prevent such frequent meetings whenever Leonard came to Throstlethwaite.

In November, however, Frank L'Estrange's illness began. This threw Ruth and Leonard together more than ever, and in a way which it was equally impossible to prevent or control ; but at the same time it somewhat altered the case. It was very generally known that Frank could not recover, that his life was a question merely of

months or weeks, and it was equally generally assumed that Leonard Barrington would take his place; for who else was there to do so? If this were to be, Mrs. Charteris felt that no better match could be desired for Ruth, and that it would be most impolitic now to interpose any obstacle to their intercourse which Leonard might resent afterwards.

Everything had therefore gone on as before, and, in consequence of the small worldly considerations which influenced Mrs. Charteris's mind, matters were now in a state as little likely as possible to conduce to the happiness of any one of the people concerned; for few positions are more trying than that in which Ruth and Leonard were thus allowed to remain towards each other.

There was no acknowledged tie between them; no word of explanation had ever passed; and yet there was on both sides a tacit assumption of all that the most open mutual explanation could have expressed. Such a relationship, if rendered inevitable by circumstances, as it seemed to be in this case, is hard perhaps on both parties, though it can never be equally so, for it is certain to fall the hardest on whichever has the most generous nature. That one, whichever it may be, who gives without stint or thought of self, who loves the most deeply and truly, is sure to suffer the most constantly and the most keenly.

As yet, however, no shadow of future trouble had clouded Ruth's brightness. Ever since she could remember, she and Leonard had been friends and companions; there had always been more perfect sympathy between them than between her and any of her brothers, dear to her though "the boys" were; but she was no precocious woman of the world, or vulgar, self-conscious school-girl, and no thought of anything further had oc-

curred to her before the time came when he had ceased to be with them. She had often missed him during the years that he was absent, and had gladly welcomed him on his return ; but the previous state of things between them could not last long unchanged.

Ruth had been for three years in society. She was generally admired and liked, and, though she was as simple-hearted and unaffected as ever, she was by no means unobservant. That Leonard preferred her to others as decidedly as of old was obvious enough, and she very soon perceived that his preference now was of a totally different kind. She felt that he loved her, and that he meant her to understand that he did, though he did not say so. Her judgment acquiesced in his silence as fully as her heart appreciated his affection. Of course he could not speak ; for if he were to do so it must be avowed to her parents at once,—which would entail their certain refusal of consent to entertain any such notion, a decree of separation, and all the annoying fuss usual on such occasions.

Till he had won something of a position for himself—till he could hold out some faint prospect of being able to support a wife—Ruth felt that he was wise to be silent and to trust to her comprehension and faith, as she trusted to his. Of the possible change that Frank L'Estrange's death might make in his position, she had never thought.

Warmly attached to Mrs. L'Estrange, and sincerely fond of Frank, her sympathies were so wholly with them that the question of the future heirship of Throstlethwaite had never crossed her mind, and, just because she was in every way so nearly concerned in the matter, it had never been mentioned before her by friends and acquaintances. She had never even heard it alluded to in her own home, for her father, feeling warmly for his old friend's grief,

and disliking painful subjects, had never spoken of it; and her mother, though fully alive to the importance of the question, as far as Leonard's chance of fortune was concerned, had thought silence the most judicious measure with regard to her daughter. She wished everything to be as undecided as possible, so as to be able in the future to take whatever line might seem to be the most desirable.

The general conviction, "all up and down," that "Miss Ruth and Mr. Leonard were to make a match of it," was certainly not weakened that Saturday afternoon at Throstlethwaite by their coming down from the house to the lake together.

Ruth was well known in the parish; and while Leonard went on to make her boat ready for starting, she stopped to speak to the bark-peelers and to make friendly inquiries after bedridden grandmothers and sick children. She had a cheerful word, too, for the busy carpenter and painter; and then she passed on to the landing-place, quite unconscious that she was being looked upon as certain to be the future mistress of Throstlethwaite, but with a secret anxiety as to what was before her, which was as new as it was painful, and which only instinctive girlish pride prevented her from showing.

The walk from the house to the lake was very short, but it had sufficed to show her that Leonard was more thoroughly out of sorts than she had ever seen him since their childish days.

She had noticed, even while gayly telling her story to Frank, that Leonard was annoyed,—that he did not like what she had been doing,—and she was half sorry, half amused. She knew that he objected strongly to women doing anything that could possibly excite remark,—she had often laughed at him for being absurdly conventional,

—and she knew also that he was disposed to be unreasonably annoyed at her showing any attention to any other man, even though it were but a courtesy to a stranger.

She fully expected some half-earnest, half-playful, and wholly gratifying remonstrance as soon as they should be alone, and was prepared to defend herself in the same fashion ; but when Leonard walked by her side all the way to the lake in moody silence, she was first surprised, and then hurt and indignant.

Long ago, she had been well accustomed to his occasional moods, and had always known how to manage them ; but in those days he had not had the same power to wound her. In the frankness of boy and girl intimacy, if he were cross and unreasonable she would laugh at him and scold him into good humor again. She could not do it now.

They had renewed their friendship, after a three years' separation, no longer as boy and girl, but as man and woman ; and the habits of early intimacy had served only to make the path to a mutual understanding shorter and smoother than it could otherwise have been. There had been none of the formality of a first acquaintance, no stiff barrier of reserve to pass on the way to confidence ; but there had been on Leonard's side, while Ruth's affection was still to be won from rivals, all the deference and courtesy and delicate consideration likely to aid his cause, and which no one could show more gracefully and pleasantly.

This was the first occasion on which Ruth had been made to know how completely a girl's feelings are at the mercy of a man to whom she has accorded the position at once of an adopted brother and of a tacitly accepted though unacknowledged lover. She has placed in his hands a fatal power to torture, which, if there is a flaw in

the generosity of his nature, is certain to be used sooner or later ; and if her instinct of womanly reserve is delicate, and her love is deep, she feels it equally impossible to remonstrate or retaliate.

When Ruth reached the end of the landing-place, Leonard was still in the boat, which he had freed from its fastenings and made quite ready for starting ; but he had evidently not yet recovered his temper, for he did not speak, though he held out a hand to help her to step down from the little raised platform.

" Thanks ; good-by !" said Ruth, very quietly, as she stood aside to allow him to leave the boat.

Painful though it might be to her to part in this way, she felt that Leonard's displeasure was unreasonable and his manner unjustifiable, and her own temper was as independent as it was sweet. The strength of her affection, instead of blinding her to the truth, only made her more keenly sensitive to the pain which the perception of it could give. Though she could scarcely be said to *resent* his conduct, it would not have been possible to her to attempt to restore him to good humor by even the slightest approach to flattery.

Leonard's reply to her farewell was to take up the oars.

" I shall row you up to Monksholme," he said. " There is plenty of time for me to walk back before dinner, and you have certainly done quite enough, *if not too much*, already to-day."

" I have done nothing to tire me, thank you," replied Ruth, in the same coldly quiet tone, though with rapid changes of color ; " and, really, I would rather row myself home than have you for a boatman in your present state of mind."

She had broken the ice.

" You cannot wonder at my hating to hear of your doing

such things," he exclaimed, impetuously, the moment she stopped speaking. "What would even Edgar say to your rowing off in that way with any confounded tramping snob who happened to carry a lame dog a few yards for you? And if *he*——"

His roughness hurt Ruth too deeply for the anger she might otherwise have felt; but she interrupted him quickly, in fear lest he should go so far as to make a quarrel inevitable.

"What Edgar might think or say has nothing to do with it, Leonard; and we will not talk about it. I see no harm in what I did. However, if I am in such deep disgrace for rowing one gentleman across the lake to-day, I should think that letting another row me home would only make matters worse: so good-by."

The pain which was betrayed by the tone of her voice, in spite of the effort she made to control it, touched Leonard, and conquered his ill humor.

He laughed, as he gave a vigorous push with one oar against the landing, which sent the boat off at once several feet from the shore and into deep water.

"We'll set one against the other," he said, beginning to row, and answering her half-appealing glance with a smile, which was his only attempt at an apology, but which was at once accepted as atonement in full for his recent behavior.

"But will not Frank want you—or Mrs. L'Estrange?" suggested Ruth. "Of course it is very pleasant that you should come; but ought you to leave them?"

"Frank always rests between tea and dinner," was Leonard's reply. "And as for Aunt Margaret, she has no thought now but one, no interest in anything except the fluctuations of that poor boy's illness."

"It would be very natural, surely, if it were so," said

Ruth ; " but I don't think it is. When such a terrible grief is hanging over her, I have often wondered how she can force herself to attend to business as she does. She seems to put aside nothing that has any real claim upon her ; and I suppose you can help her sometimes."

" Sometimes,—yes ; but she does not want me now, I am sure ; and, considering how long this has gone on, and may still go on, you must not grudge me an hour's pleasure, Ruth."

Ruth smiled.

" I am glad that there is anything which can lighten the pain of all this for you, ever so little. Of course it must be worse for you than for any one except Mrs. L'Estrange. It is all so unspeakably sad. Every one says there is no hope ; but sometimes when he is bright, as he was to-day, I cannot *help* hoping,—it seems so impossible that his death can really have been decreed now, when his life is so precious to every one round him."

" The law of nature which rules the question of life or death can scarcely be said to *decree*," replied Leonard. " It has no power of choice ; it is merely a case of——"

Ruth raised her hand with a deprecating gesture.

" Not now," she entreated. " Don't let us talk our miserable metaphysics in the presence of such a reality as this sorrow. Its meaning, whatever it may be, lies far too deep for argument. There can be no scientific physical explanation of the existence of such suffering as *his mother's*, and one cannot help longing to know why it should be allowed." She paused, and for a minute or two there was silence,—broken at length by Leonard's gently repeating with faultless tone and taste the stanzas from " In Memoriam" beginning with the lines,—

" Oh, yet we trust that somehow good
Shall be the final goal of ill."

He could not have chosen a reply more judiciously. Sense and sound both suited Ruth's mood exactly, and as his voice ceased she withdrew her eyes from the soft, mysterious, purple distance into which she had been gazing, and thanked him with a bright, sweet smile for the sympathy which she felt to be so complete, but of which the full perfection certainly existed only in her own imagination.

Not that it was by any means all intentional acting on Leonard's part. His intelligence was quick and well cultivated, and all his superficial instincts were graceful and pleasant, so that when no undercurrent of temper or self-consideration stirred the ignoble side of his really shallow and selfish nature, he readily adopted the higher and purer tone suggested to him by another mind, and for the moment enjoyed the consciousness of its being his own.

From their childhood Ruth's presence had always tended to bring out all that was best in him; and this perhaps accounted not only for her affection for him, and for her ignorance of his faults, in spite of their having grown up together, but also for the truth and strength of his love for her. When with her, he was at peace with himself, being gifted with the comfortable power of forgetting all past failures and of ignoring the possibility of others in the future.

For a time after this, they were both silent. Ruth was pondering dreamily on the mysterious inequalities of human life. Why should she be so unspeakably happy,—with a joy which not even her sympathy in the sorrow of others could really cloud,—while Mrs. L'Estrange must lose what was to her the one ray of sunshine in her widowed life?

Leonard could scarcely be said to be thinking at all. For the moment he was only pleasantly conscious of the

bright side of his life, and gave himself up to the enjoyment of it, picturing to himself a future without troubles or difficulties, and with Ruth in all her fresh sweet grace for a constant companion. He accepted, with a careless sense of its being only his due, the brilliant prospect which he fancied was opening before him, without a thought that the same cause which was to bring all this sunshine to him must cast the darkest shadow upon the life of the aunt to whom he owed everything.

A railway-whistle, distant, but shrill and distinct as it came over the water through the still evening air, startled them both from their dreams, and Ruth instinctively looked at her watch.

"Only a goods-train somewhere about," said Leonard, carelessly. "It cannot be much after six."

"Five minutes," replied Ruth. "And the train by which the Kennedys come is not due at Thornbeck till half-past: so I have more time to spare than you have. We shall be at our landing in ten minutes more, but *you* will have three miles to walk home, while *I* have about a quarter of one."

"Aunt Margaret dines at half-past seven: so I shall have lots of time."

"If it is fine, I suppose you will come up to church to-morrow, and then you will see Agatha."

Still under the influence of his recent dreams, and forgetting for the moment their utter unreality and the folly of alluding to them, Leonard answered, "I shall be glad to see her; and yet, Ruth, until quite lately I dreaded her return more than I can tell you."

"But why? You could not be afraid of her worrying you now about dirty boots or fishy hands, and, if I remember right, those were your standard subjects of quarrel in former days?"

Leonard laughed.

"Not exactly. My recent fears were more serious. I dreaded lest her influence over Mrs. Charteris should be too strong for me: I feared that it might even affect *you*."

Ruth's color deepened to crimson as she answered,—

"Agatha and I may very likely think differently on many subjects, but you ought to know better than to suppose me so very easily influenced without good reason."

"The reasons might once have seemed good and forcible enough," said Leonard. "It is different now, and I do not think she will even wish to banish me, any more than your mother does; but still—it must all be uncertain for an indefinite time yet,—and they may think——. Ruth, will you *promise* me that they shall not persuade you to change, however long it may be before I can speak out and we can acknowledge it all?"

Leonard's eyes and voice were admirably adapted to enforce such an appeal, and Ruth's heart responded to each pleading look and tone; but, though her lips trembled a little, she answered, resolutely, "If we speak at all, Leonard, we must speak plainly."

"I will speak as plainly as you could possibly desire, with the greatest pleasure," began Leonard, playfully, looking up at her as he bent towards her in rowing.

But Ruth, though she could not refuse to smile, spoke quickly and gravely:

"I do not mean nonsense, Leonard. I mean that I wish you had been content to let things go on as they were,—trusting me, as I would have trusted you, even through years of silent waiting."

"But surely a promise on both sides can do no harm," urged Leonard. "It will only relieve us from the horrible necessity of talking in riddles, or else keeping silence as to what most nearly concerns us. Everything may

outwardly go on just the same as before ; no one need know that there is any difference,—there won't *be* any, except that we shall be perfectly open and true towards each other, and I shall not need to go half mad with jealousy if I fancy that Agatha is using all her influence in favor of——”

Ruth interrupted him :

“That is absurd, Leonard, and you know it ; and you know, too, that you ought not to try to persuade me into making a secret engagement. Oh, *why* did you not let things alone ?”

Leonard had already repented his imprudence ; but by this time he was bent on having his own way, and was rather vexed by her opposition and her gentle reproaches.

“Don't be missish and fantastically conscientious, Ruth,” he said. “It is quite unworthy of you to split hairs in that way. You have known for months that I loved you and lived on the hope of making you my wife as soon as I could ; and now, just because I *say* so, you make all this fuss.”

Ruth's color went and came quickly, and her eyes filled with tears ; but she checked them, and forcibly steadied the quivering of her lips before she spoke.

“It is true that I understood you, and that I thanked you in my heart for making me understand ; but I answered you as plainly as you had spoken to me. I thought we understood each other, and that it was enough.”

Leonard attempted a protest, but she continued,—

“I thanked you also, quite as much, for the silence which spared me all difficulty about concealment. But now that you have spoken, what can I do ?”

“Do ? Why, give me the promise I ask, like the darling you are, and let everything go on quietly, just as it was doing before. To speak to your people now is im-

possible, of course,—would be utterly ridiculous ; there are things which *can't* be said yet ; but you must have seen that no objection is ever made by anybody to our being together as much as ever we like."

"I will make no promise of any kind that I am to keep secret," replied Ruth, firmly. "Speak to papa if you like, and I will openly promise you to wait patiently for any number of years and in spite of any amount of opposition ; but I have been glad that you have thought it best not to do this, because I know all the fuss there would be, and that everything that could be done to separate us would be done. If papa is not to be told, I will neither make nor receive any promise whatever ; and you must not speak of it ever again until you can do so openly."

They were at the Monksholme landing by this time, and Ruth stepped from the boat as she spoke, while Leonard instinctively fastened its chain before he followed her.

"To ask me to speak to Mr. Charteris now is simply babyish, Ruth," he said, angrily. "He himself would neither wish it nor expect it. It would make everything awkward. But it is absurd to make such a fuss about keeping the thing to ourselves just for a few months, or perhaps only weeks. It cannot be more than that now before I shall be in a position when it will be easy to get it settled. Aunt Margaret is so fond of you that——"

Ruth for the first time perceived his meaning, and recoiled from him with a look which he found it difficult to forget. Something of the gulf between their natures was revealed to her at that moment.

Leonard, conscious that he had been foolish and rash and had made a serious mistake, was angry with Ruth instead of with himself, and resented the instinctive disapprobation she had shown.

"It is for you to decide," he said, impetuously.

"Promise *now* that you will be my wife as soon as I can openly ask for you, or let us give it up. It is time to stop trifling."

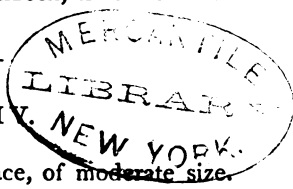
Ruth was very pale.

"I have never trifled," she replied. "But not even for you will I do what I know to be wrong."

Without another word, Leonard strode angrily away, and Ruth was left alone. She leaned against one of the posts on the landing-place and looked out over the lake, but she saw nothing. All the light seemed suddenly gone from that lovely sunset scene, and with it the unclouded joyousness of her girlhood; but she did not repent her decision, even if Leonard should accept it as final, for she knew that she had been right.

Her whole nature revolted from the idea of a secret engagement depending for its fulfillment upon Frank L'Estrange's death. If it could only have been possible to forget that the idea had ever been presented to her mind! But, though she turned from it with a sense of sickening shame, it haunted her incessantly, and it was only by a desperate effort that she at last roused herself to walk home across the fields in time to meet the carriage at the door on its return from Thornbeck, if it should be punctual.

CHAPTER IV.



MONKSHOLME was a pleasant place, of moderate size. The gardens and grounds were pretty and well kept, and the house was handsome, roomy, and comfortable. Well suited to the fortune of its owner, there was no sense of effort anywhere, and everything about the establishment, both in-doors and out, was in admirable order.

Mr. Charteris himself was an active, genial country gentleman, who had been from his youth one of the most popular men in his county. He was a sensible, useful magistrate, a kind and judicious landlord and master, a good man of business, and a fairly enlightened politician, with perhaps even rather fewer prejudices than might have been expected ; but he had little interest in literature, art, or science, and seldom read anything except newspapers, or sometimes an article in a magazine. His farm, his stable, and his game provided ample occupation and amusement for his leisure hours. He was fond of his home and of his wife and children, and was also a staunch, warm-hearted friend, most cheerfully and cordially sociable with all his neighbors, both high and low.

Mrs. Charteris was a pretty, lady-like woman, of a much smaller and poorer nature than her husband, but clever enough to be pleasant and successful in daily life. Her household was quietly and admirably managed ; her children were well brought up ; and her parties, of whatever kind, were never failures. She was a thoroughly good wife and mistress, something of a slave to her handsome, spirited boys, and a kind, though somewhat arbitrary, mother and chaperon to her daughters.

The young people of the family were much what might have been expected. They inherited good constitutions, good looks, and good tempers from their ancestors. The boys were all essentially well-conducted, and none of them had given their parents any serious trouble. They all had a decided preference for pleasure over work, and an apparently unlimited appetite for sport ; but they had sense enough to see that, as Providence *had* made the mistake of so arranging the world that life (especially for younger brothers) could not be a perpetual holiday, it was necessary to exert themselves ; and, as they had all

fair abilities, and a good deal of conscience as to honest work, they were getting on well in their respective lines.

Edgar was in the army, and was now in Ireland with his regiment ; Oswald was a clerk in one of the Government offices ; Jack was just gone to Australia, where a brother of his mother's was a prosperous settler ; George was at sea ; and Bob, a boy of seventeen, was still at Eton, with his future destination as yet unsettled, and with no present ambition so engrossing as that of being in the eleven for the year, and distinguishing himself at Lord's.

Agatha very much resembled her mother both in appearance and in character, only with the added charm of the true Charteris sunny temper and bright spirits. She had married early and well.

Many circumstances had tended to make Ruth in some ways unlike the rest of her family. Her temperament was probably different, to begin with, and, though she had ostensibly been educated in exactly the same way as her sister, the accidental impulses given to the development of her mind and character had all tended to increase that difference. Leonard Barrington had unquestionably had much to do with it. He was, both as a boy and a young man, intensely modern in mind and tastes, and Ruth had always been the confidante of the various phases through which he had passed. He was quick and impressionable, and had taken an interest, temporary it might be, but genuine as far as it went, in almost every conceivable subject. In each succeeding school or college vacation, Ruth had heard his ideas and suggestions, crude and superficial enough, no doubt, but bright and inspiring for the time. With more perseverance than he had, and fewer distractions, Ruth, when left to herself during the school-terms, acquired the habit of pondering over past discussions and ferreting out books which referred to them,

and thus quietly trying to enlighten herself upon questions which her governess would have stared to think should occupy her pupil's mind.

Her father would have laughed at her, and her mother would have forbidden such waste of time, had they known what she did; but, with an instinctive shrinking from unsympathizing comments, she never spoke of the thoughts and fancies which filled her mind. From Leonard she received no help whatever beyond the original suggestions which gave her the impulse to use her own powers; for, in all likelihood, when another vacation again threw them together he was under the influence of some totally different school of thought, or engrossed in some study of another kind, and had neither interest nor attention to bestow on what she had been doing.

Ruth, of course, practiced the necessary feminine self-suppression, accepted his capricious changes of interest as so many signs of progress, and tried, in puzzled admiration, to follow him in what she believed to be his rapid growth. That the result in her mind was chaotic may easily be believed; but, fortunately for her, when she was about seventeen an accidental conversation revealed the state of things to Mrs. L'Estrange. Being herself a well-read woman of vigorous understanding, with a keen interest in the progress of almost every branch of human knowledge, she delighted in helping a bright girl forward, and gave in full measure the sympathy and encouragement which, in spite of the truest family affection and confidence, were not (because they could not be) forthcoming in her own home.

Thus it happened that Ruth, though she could ride and row and dance and laugh and generally enjoy life as a true Charteris ought, had another and a deeper side of mind and character. She felt, and with some truth, that

she owed this to Leonard's influence; and thus he was placed in her imagination on a false pedestal, and was loved with an admiring gratitude which was wholly undeserved.

The train by which the Kennedys came was unusually late that day. It did not reach Thornbeck till after seven, so that it was fully eight before they were all at Monksholme. The evening was short, and, though Ruth mentioned her afternoon adventures, she was scarcely attended to, and her tired preoccupied looks passed almost unnoticed. There was time for little more than the observation that Agatha was as pretty as ever and apparently as lively, and that her husband was just what Ruth remembered him, plain but rather distinguished-looking, and so quiet and silent as to appear considerably more his wife's senior than he really was. On the whole, however, Ruth was favorably impressed by the brother-in-law whom she had expected to find so formidable, and ceased to dread having him to entertain.

Just before the party dispersed for the night, a small parcel of books was given to Ruth, with the information that Michael Hodgson had been over to see his daughter, and had brought this back with him.

Michael Hodgson was the Monksholme gamekeeper, and his daughter Dinah was dairymaid at Throstlethwaite.

Mrs. L'Estrange so constantly sent Ruth books that no comments were made, and Ruth herself carried the parcel up-stairs and placed it on her table unopened. It remained there even after the maid was gone and she was alone; for she felt little inclination to open it, or to do anything except think fruitlessly of those last ten minutes on the lake, and long to recall them.

She did not regret her refusal to give a secret promise, for she knew that she had done right; but she felt that if

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she had refused less abruptly, if she had been less self-asserting and less reproachful, she might have been able to avoid annoying Leonard so much as to make him leave her in anger. She did not for a moment imagine that this estrangement would last, but it was intensely painful to her for the time; and she felt that a frequent repetition of such scenes would be almost more than she could bear, while she saw that it would be most difficult to keep clear of them, if Leonard allowed himself to be tormented by jealous fancies. It was really too foolish and unreasonable of him; but still, accepting it as a proof of affection, Ruth could not be very indignant with him for it.

Many excuses for his whole conduct had already presented themselves to her mind and found ready admission. Of course he ought not to have asked her to make a secret engagement,—but then men were always impatient. She supposed that it was really much more difficult for him to wait and trust in silence than it was for her: according to her experience, men never *would* wait quietly for *anything*, unless they could fill up the time by taking some active steps to gain it; passive silent patience was utterly repugnant to them; and if this were so, of course she could not be surprised at Leonard's having passing moods of unreasonable irritability.

She wished most heartily that he had not allowed her to see that he was counting upon succeeding to Throstlethwaite, for the thought of entertaining such a hope was hateful to her; and yet, once made conscious of such a possible solution of all their difficulties, she could not forget it. Of course it was only natural that men should always see the matter-of-fact business side of life, instead of being wholly engrossed by sympathy with sorrow, and the probable future fate of so large and important a prop-

erty could not be overlooked by them when once it was known that Frank L'Estrange could not recover.

^ If the question were to be considered at all, it certainly seemed natural and probable that Leonard should take Frank's place; and Ruth could not help feeling how easy everything would be for them then. She thought, too, how glad she should be to have almost a daughter's right to devote herself to doing all that could be done to cheer and brighten Mrs. L'Estrange's life; and then she suddenly recoiled from the picture she had allowed her imagination to draw. It seemed too horribly selfish to build castles in the air for future happiness, of which the foundations must rise from such a depth of sorrow.

Wearied with these thoughts, Ruth at length opened the parcel of books, doing it mechanically, and without any real interest. She found, on looking at it, that the address was written by Leonard, and that it contained a couple of French books which Mrs. L'Estrange had promised to lend to her.

There was also the following note :

“A blessed chance for me! Michael Hodgson sends in to ask if there is any message for Monksholme, and Aunt Margaret tells me to find these books and send them to you. I can write what I might not have found it easy to say to-morrow. I was a brute to you this afternoon, I know,—but you *don't*—you *can't* understand half how intolerable it is to me to be unable to claim you openly,—to feel that all the world has as much right as I have to your attention. Still, you were right, and I was wrong from beginning to end; but you will be generous, my dearest, as you always are. Forgive me, and forget it all; let everything be as it was before; have it your own way, and I will bear it as best I may. I will ask nothing

more that you cannot grant. I will be content with the certainty which your words this afternoon gave me,—that you are, and always will be, my guardian angel,—that your love is mine, and will not be turned from me, though for a time it must be silent,—as I will force myself to make mine, because I am so wholly yours, that at your bidding I will accept silence as all-sufficient and most precious speech. I shall see you to-morrow, and know that I am forgiven.

“L. B.”

This note, hastily written, carelessly blotted, and scarcely legible, fully restored Ruth's peace for the time. She, perhaps not unnaturally, dwelt only on the affection expressed by every word, on the candor of Leonard's acknowledgment of having been wrong, on his frank admission that she was right, and on his concession to her that everything should be as it had been before.

She was touched and grateful, and allowed herself to be blind to the fact that in reality he assumed all that she had refused to grant, and that though he said, “Let everything be as it was before,” his letter was really little more than an apology for his own ill temper, and an echo of her words to him, so repeated, however, as to constitute very much the sort of secret engagement for which he had asked. She did not think of this, and she did not foresee the difficulties in which it might involve her in the future. He wrote, “Forgive me, and forget it all.” To forgive was easy, and she did not remember that to forget might be impossible.

Ruth might, perhaps, do Leonard more than justice, and credit him in her imagination with qualities which he was very far indeed from possessing; but that letter was, as far as it went, a perfectly genuine expression of his

feelings at the moment. He was quite incapable of seeing the question of their making a secret engagement from her point of view, and he could not understand her romantic aversion to taking the chance of his succession to Throstlethwaite into consideration between themselves. Of course it was one of those things which could not be spoken of publicly; good taste and good policy alike decreed that it must be absolutely ignored to the outer world; but not to think of it was impossible, and not to acknowledge to each other that they did so was absurd. He admitted to himself, however, that to be even absurdly scrupulous about such things was a good point in a woman's character, though one which might sometimes be tiresome; and his irritation gradually subsided. He was selfish, willful, and impatient, but he was affectionate, and it was intolerable to him that any coolness between himself and Ruth should continue. He was man enough and gentleman enough to feel that he had given her very just cause for indignation by his manner in the earlier part of the afternoon, and he had also knowledge enough of her character to be sure that, however much she might suffer in consequence of their quarrel, she would not yield on any point which she considered a question of conscience.

He really loved Ruth as well as he was capable of loving any one: in other words, her affection and sympathy were absolutely necessary to him; he could not calmly contemplate the possible loss of what was so precious to him, and was vexed with himself for having allowed his temper to lead him into treating her in a way which might risk all that he had gained during the last few months. Under the influence of these feelings, he dashed off the note which Ruth received with the parcel of books; and instinct guided him well, for it produced upon her mind exactly the impression he desired. The mixture of tenderness

and contrition expressed in it touched her deeply ; while its tone of impetuous feeling, carefully restrained, as she thought, out of consideration for her, laid a spell upon her which she could not resist.

For the time she felt as if the fault had been chiefly hers. The position in which they stood towards each other had been more trying to him than she had understood, and she felt that *she* had been to blame in the first place for causing his fit of irritable jealousy by a careless want of consideration for what she might have known, had she thought for a moment, would be his wishes. She ought to have sent one of the men to row the stranger over the lake to Carlsgill, and have waited to make her own expedition to Throstlethwaite until he returned, as only one boat was as yet ready for use.

She ought not to have gone on making fun out of the story with Frank, when she saw that Leonard was annoyed by it ; and afterwards, when he could not conceal his vexation, she ought—even though she felt it to be unreasonable—to have borne it with patient forbearance instead of being quick to resent it, since it arose only from the love for her which was the great happiness of her life.

This, as has been already seen, was the mood in which the end of the day's events left Ruth.

Leonard, having dispatched his peace-making note, thought no more about it. He had done all that could possibly have been expected of him, and he had not a doubt of the result. He knew the generous nature he had to deal with, even if he did not appreciate it, and he was sure that Ruth would meet him after church the next morning with the sweet trusting smile and conscious blush which in its half-shy grace was so peculiarly becoming to her, and in its acknowledgment of his power was so pleas-

ant to him. She would be more surely his own than ever after this passing difference, and therefore, on the whole, perhaps, it was not to be regretted.

CHAPTER V.

AMONG the minor troubles which had helped to increase the weight of Mrs. L'Estrange's sorrow during the last few weeks, the most serious had been the gradually increasing illness of her agent.

Mr. Bailey had been her father's steward almost ever since she could remember, and had continued to hold the same office under her husband ; but during the five years since his death she had found that the old man was scarcely equal to all that was required for the care of the property in its present enlarged state, for since the discovery of the iron, which had brought in large sums of money, she had made many purchases of land.

She had felt more than once that she should have been glad to have a younger and more active and competent man in his place ; some one of higher education and wider views would be more useful to her : she had, however, far too thorough and grateful an appreciation of the life-long service of the old man to think of suggesting that he should resign.

She was quite aware, too, that, though he might be a little narrow and prejudiced and averse to modern innovations, his strict integrity, his devotion to the interest of his employers, and his careful business habits were truly valuable qualities, amply atoning for some troublesome deficiencies. His failing health during the last month or

two had added greatly to Mrs. L'Estrange's anxieties, and had thrown upon her even more business than usual at a time when she could scarcely bring herself to think of anything but her dying boy. The task of attending to the management of the property which he was never to inherit had been a daily torture.

Mr. Bailey died, somewhat suddenly, that Saturday afternoon, and the fact was known at Throstlethwaite by dinner-time, causing a good deal of excitement in the household. He had been a kindly, just, and unpretending man, and was generally respected and liked. The servants were sorry that he was gone, and thought it hard upon their mistress that she should have the worry of getting a new steward at such a time as this.

Mrs. L'Estrange herself felt and expressed very sincere regret; Frank and Leonard were both startled and sorry; and the evening had been spent in unusual silence. The question of the choice of a successor was not mentioned, though, as was seen the next morning, it occupied the minds of all three.

Frank had never got up to breakfast since his illness; it was taken to him in his own room; and it had come to be an established rule that old Daniel should go up to see him every morning at that time. He gave a daily report of stable-matters, a subject of course of unfailing interest to them both, and usually had also some bit of village news to impart or to discuss.

On Sunday morning Mr. Bailey's death naturally took precedence of all other topics.

"You'll have heard that Mr. Bailey's gone, sir?" was Daniel's beginning.

"Yes. I'm awfully sorry, Daniel, and so is everybody about, I'm sure. He was a kind old man."

"Ay. He was a good old chap, tak' him one way with

another, and a deal o' folk 'll miss him badly. You'd not have thought t' end was that near ; though he's been nowt like t' man he used to be, this long time back. It's summat like t' old brown mare last summer : I thought she'd a good two or three year more o' quiet, easy work left in her, and then early on in t' back end she went right off one day, and we found her lyin' dead in yon corner o' t' field."

Frank could scarcely help a smile at the comparison, but he answered, gravely, "I am the most sorry for my mother, Daniel. This will be a great loss to her. I hardly know how she will ever do without him."

"T' man as can't be done without's a chap as has got to be born yet, I'm thinkin', sir!" replied Daniel, whose natural instinct was always to differ from whatever was said to him. "It's like them holes t' bairns digs by t' sea ; next day there's no findin' even where t' place was!"

"I suppose that's true, Daniel ; but it's rather hard lines for a man who has worked for other people all his life, up to the very last, to feel that when he dies he won't even be missed."

"He's safe to be missed, is old Bailey," was the inconsistent answer. "Good men's scarce, nowadays, and a steward in a place like this has a deal o' power, even when there's a missis like ours. It's a pity he's gone yet a bit."

"Yes. If he had only lived a few years longer, I could have helped my mother so much that having a new man wouldn't have been half the bother for her. But now, as soon as I am well again I must go up to Oxford, and I shan't be much here for two or three years. I wish this had not happened just now."

"Well, Mr. Frank, anyway it's a good job for a man hissel' to go while he's like to be missed and wanted back,

instead of hangin' on ever so long, half doitin' like, and that tiddious that everybody's wishin' they were well shot of him!"

Mrs. L'Estrange came in at this moment on her way down-stairs. Her first visit to Frank was always made at a much earlier hour, but she never failed to look in upon him again before going down to breakfast. Her entrance now naturally changed the subject of conversation and suggested other ideas to Frank's mind.

"How are you going to church, mother?" he inquired. "It is so beautiful again to-day, that if the carriage came back for once, instead of putting up at Monksholme, I might come in it for you after service. I should so like it!"

Mrs. L'Estrange saw no reason for opposing his wish. The day was lovely, the drive could not hurt him. "Very well, dear," she said. "If Daniel and the horses don't mind the double journey, I think it would be a very good plan."

Daniel's spirit of contradiction vanished before a wish of Frank's, and he at once declared that the horses "would be all the better for a deal more work than they got."

"And you think it is sure to keep fine?"

"It's only t' second day like, ma'am, and these queer fits of summer always comes for three. There's not a cloud about."

"Don't croak, mother," said Frank. "I'm sure we've had rain enough lately to last awhile! It *must* have all come down!"

"Ay! one would think they mun be clean out o' stuff up yonder, after all they've sent us!" said Daniel. "But it's a fine deep well, is yon!"

"It all goes up again by evaporation, you know," Frank explained, with a smile.

"Mebbes it may, sir. It's not for me to say it doesn't. There's a many queer fancies astir nowadays, and one here and there'll m'appen be true. Anyway, t' moon was out of her first quarter yesterday, and a change in t' weather then's sartin sure to hold, whatever Mr. Campbell says!"

"Mr. Campbell" was the head gardener,—a new-comer, and rather a pedantic young Scotchman,—whose tendency to self-assertion occasionally clashed with Daniel's prejudices.

"Does Campbell not believe in the moon?" asked Frank, exchanging a smile with his mother as she left the room.

"Not a bit, sir. When I said to him yesterday what I said just now, 'Daniel,' says he, 'you're behind the time, talkin' of the moon's quarters. You haven't got no acquaintance with science.' 'And what'n a chap may *he* be?' says I. 'But if yon's t' sort o' silly like stuff he talks, I'm none that much worse of not knowin' him!'"

Frank laughed. "No worse at all, Daniel! But now tell me how Bayard's cold is getting on. I hope to ride again soon, and I want his wind to be all right."

"Bayard's all right again, sir. The chestnut colt was coughin' a bit this morning, but nothin' much to mind about."

"Do you think the stable doesn't get too hot this weather? Leonard said the thermometer yesterday evening stood at——"

The mention of Leonard in reference to stable-matters had always much the same effect on Daniel as a scarlet shawl on an old bull. The temperature of his stable, too, was a tender point, as Frank well knew, for not even he could succeed in getting it kept as it ought to be. "Mr. Leonard's head's just stuffed that full o' fancies that there's

no doin' with him ! If a man can't tell when his stable's over cold or hot, without a bit measurin' glass stuck up afore his nose, he'd best keep out o' t' road, and not set up for a coachman ! Never you fear, Mr. Frank, the horses shan't take no harm so long as I'm spared. And now I should be going to my work. Shall I ring first for Palmer to come to dress you, sir ?"

Frank acquiesced, and Daniel departed. When Mrs. L'Estrange came in again before starting for church, Frank was up and dressed and had had his chair placed near the window. He was looking quite as bright as he had done the day before, and turned eagerly towards his mother as she entered.

"That's right !" he exclaimed. "There's lots of time still before you need go, and I have something to say. I don't often help you, mother, but I've got a splendid idea now ! You'll have to find somebody to take poor old Bailey's place ?"

"Yes. As soon as I can. In some ways he will be very difficult to replace ; but I think it will be wise now to have some one of a different kind,—an educated gentleman, in fact. I must consider about it."

"I thought you would want that now, mother ; and first I thought about Leonard. It would be such a capital way to give him an income and let him set up with Ruth ; but I suppose he could hardly do the work."

"The idea occurred to me too, Frank, but only to be rejected at once. Leonard would be quite unfit for such a place. We must have a man of some experience and weight of character, as well as one trained to the sort of business."

"Exactly. And I have thought of one. If only we could find Stephen Powys !"

"Find *whom*, my dear ?" said Mrs. L'Estrange, looking thoroughly puzzled.

"Stephen Powys, mother. Don't you recollect about him? He was the big brother who came to see after Dick Powys when he and I had the scarlet fever together at old Morgan's, long ago; and he took us both to Llandudno afterwards. You and papa were abroad and couldn't come, you know; and he looked after me as well as Dick, because we wouldn't be separated."

"I remember," replied Mrs. L'Estrange. "He was very kind to you, and your head was full of him for a long time; you were always quoting him on every possible occasion. They were to have come to stay here the next summer, but your little friend was drowned in bathing, and that put an end to it all. But what has he to do with our present difficulty about an agent?"

"Well, you know, his father was a great banker at Chelsfield, and they had a beautiful place somewhere in the country, and were biggish people; but not long after Dick was drowned the bank broke, and the father died, and there was a general smash. They were full of it at the time at old Morgan's, and I remember how I longed to write and tell Stephen how awfully sorry I was; but I was such a little chap,—only eleven, you know,—and he was grown up, and I thought he would think it cheeky. Anyhow, I didn't do it, and by degrees I forgot all about it till this last summer, when I met a fellow at Lord's who used to be at Morgan's with us. He spoke about the Powyses, and he told me about the time when old Powys died, and said Stephen had behaved like a brick, and that he and his mother had given up everything—things they needn't, I mean—to pay all the debts; and he had worked hard ever since, and had entirely supported his mother. It was just what he would do. I never came across anybody like him, and I *should* be so glad to see him again! I am sure he would make you a capital agent, and you

could pay him well, and it would be first-rate for me to have him about."

"My dear boy, you take one's breath away! If you really wish so much to see Mr. Powys, of course I shall be delighted to ask him to come here, if you can tell me where to find him. But the appointment of an agent is not a thing to play with, Frank: it is a serious responsibility; and I cannot see any grounds for supposing that he would either wish for such an office or be fitted for it."

"But you can inquire, and keep it open until you have found out all about him. It is a real inspiration, mother, I assure you. I *know* he would do, and I have set my heart on your having him."

Mrs. L'Estrange smiled, though with an effort.

"You are tiring yourself, my boy, with all this talking. If you are really in earnest in wishing it so much, of course I will inquire. But where? And of whom?"

"Ainslie did not know his address, and he was going off to India almost directly, so he couldn't get it for me; but he said the way *he* knew about Stephen was from a cousin of his own, who had been a friend of his both at Harrow and Cambridge, and who still heard from him now and then. This man's a barrister, and lives in the Temple somewhere, and I've got his name and address. Ainslie wrote it down for me. His cousin wasn't in town then, so I couldn't go and inquire, but I meant to do it when I went up to Oxford; only then came this bothering illness, and I've never stirred since. Ainslie said he was sure his cousin would know where Stephen was, and would tell me how to find him. He fancied he lived somewhere down in Devonshire, and was something like a bailiff, but he didn't know exactly. So you see, mother, it isn't just nonsense."

Frank had evidently seized on the idea with the per-

tinacity of illness, and his mother would not oppose him. To make the inquiry would be easy, and, though probably it would lead to nothing, it would interest and please him to have it done.

"Well, then, we will write to this cousin of Ainslie's, and see what he can tell us," she said. "Only, my darling, you must remember that an agent has real and important duties, and great power over numbers of people, and I cannot appoint one lightly."

"All right," was Frank's answer. "I'm quite sure that Stephen Powys, if he can be found, will bear any amount of investigation. Only, mother, don't *write*. Letters go on so slowly, and say so little; you never get to the end of anything. Send Leonard up. I'll give him the address of this man, and he can hear all *he* can tell, and then go down to the Land's End, if necessary, and see Stephen himself; and in that way you will know all there is to know in no time. *Do*, mother! It *can* do no harm, you know. Leonard will enjoy the lark, and so shall I at second hand; though it *is* rather ignominious to be stupid and helpless so long, instead of being able to go with him!"

The cheerful sweetness with which Frank bore his invalidism was very touching, while his firm conviction that health and strength must soon return was unspeakably sad.

His mother bent fondly over him resolving that any pleasure which she could possibly give him should be given without delay.

"It is a romantic fancy, dear boy," she said, with a smile. "But romance sometimes turns out very good common sense. It shall be as you wish. We will settle all about it this afternoon. I will get Mr. Nichols to give Leonard a few days' leave, and he shall go on this won-

derful quest, which we will hope won't prove a wild-goose chase! Did you say anything about it to him when he was with you this morning?"

"Of course not, till I had spoken to you. There's the carriage coming round." And Frank's attention was instantly given to the window, from which he could see the front door and inspect the horses now standing there.

Mrs. L'Estrange wondered whether any idea that he himself might take the place of her agent had crossed Leonard's mind. She saw by the slight shadow which passed over his face when, during their drive to the church, she told him of Frank's scheme, that he *had* thought of it; but he made no remark, except that it would be a great pity to thwart Frank, and that he should be very glad to go and find out all he could.

"Asking questions binds you to nothing, Aunt Margaret, and it need not even cause any delay, for you can easily inquire in other directions at the same time. If you will arrange it with Nichols, I will go as soon as ever you like. Of course, though, it is a great chance that you may be able to do what Frank wishes."

"I have prepared him for that," replied his aunt, promptly. "I explained to him that I could not treat the agency as a toy to be given either at my caprice or his. I must find the best man I can, and he must be some one with a thorough knowledge of business and considerable experience in the world. I want the help of an agent whose character would give him influence over the people, and on whose judgment I could depend."

She spoke quietly, but with the intention of being understood, and she saw that Leonard did understand. He could not prevent a sudden though slight flush from betraying his consciousness of her meaning. He answered, however, quite readily. "Yes. This property

ought to have a thoroughly capable agent. It is far too much for you without really good help, and I fancy that can only be had from men trained to the work."

His aunt was pleased with him for bearing the disappointment so well, and for his readiness to promote Frank's pleasure; but in truth the disappointment was only momentary. He had thought at first that to be appointed to the agency would be pleasant enough, for he was tired of his monotonous work at the bank in Edenford, and would have enjoyed the necessary riding about the country and the freedom which the change would have given him. It would have been a gratifying mark of his aunt's confidence, too, and, as such, very useful to him; it would also have provided him with an income and a house, and would have made an open engagement with Ruth Charteris quite possible. To set against all this, the work would have been hard,—much harder than he liked. He felt that it would be infinitely pleasanter to him to be *merely* the heir,—as Frank would have been,—with a suitable allowance and a home at Throstlethwaite for himself and Ruth, instead of being expected to do the agent's work. Leonard hated "drudgery," as he called steady work of any kind; and thus he reconciled himself to Mrs. L'Estrange's present decision almost as soon as it was known to him.

The immediate income was a loss, but one scarcely worth considering, and the fact of his being sent to make inquiries about a new agent—of such an apparently important errand as this being intrusted to him—would certainly be generally looked upon as almost an acknowledgment of his claim to succeed to Frank's place. Apart, however, from all such thoughts of himself, Leonard was really good-natured, and was very glad to help in giving the poor boy any gratification that seemed possible. He

would have done it even at some sacrifice of his own pleasure; but, fortunately, none was required. An expedition at this time of the year to London, and then to Devonshire or Cornwall, with all his expenses paid, would be a very acceptable break in his Edenford life, and really, as Frank had called it "a lark" which he should heartily enjoy.

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN Mrs. L'Estrange and Leonard arrived at the little church of St. Bride's, the Monksholme party were already in their places; but when the service was over and the congregation had dispersed, the two families left the church together. The Throstlethwaite carriage, which was usually put up at Monksholme during the service, so that they all walked up to the house together, was to-day waiting just outside the gates of the church-yard, and Frank was in it, with his wraps and cushions as carefully arranged as if his mother herself had been there to attend to them. Daniel had drawn up the carriage, which was open, in the full warm sunshine, where there was shelter from even the light breeze that was stirring, and at a judicious distance from the path along which every one must pass, so that Frank need not speak to the people unless he liked.

The congregation was composed chiefly of country-people, who had known him from his birth, but they passed on with only a friendly salutation, except in one or two cases where he signed to an old servant, or to some farmer better known than the rest, to come and speak to him. It

was the first time that he had been outside the gates of Throstlethwaite since his illness began, for it had been a wet and chilly spring, and his appearance excited a great deal of interest. Much true sympathy was expressed in homely language as the different groups dispersed in various directions over the fields on their way home. The women felt for his mother, while the men regretted the loss of the fine boy who seemed likely to have made so good a master and landlord.

"Well, Frank, my boy, I'm glad to see you out again," said Mr. Charteris, cheerily, as he went up to the carriage. "Are you coming up to Monksholme to luncheon with us?"

"Oh, thanks! But I'm afraid the mere idea would give mother a fit!" was Frank's response, with the natural boyish instinct of mockery of his mother's anxious care of him. "I hope I shall be riding again soon, and then I'll turn up; but I expect she'll think to-day that I ought to go to bed directly I get back after this wonderful exertion. Oh! there's Agatha!" he added, as Mrs. Kennedy came up to her father's side. "I declare, you don't look a bit different or a day older!"

"It would be no compliment to say the same thing to you," she replied, laughing, "for you were quite a small boy when I went away. But you must talk to Nigel, not to me, about my trick of looking as if I couldn't get out of my teens! *He* pretends to be pleased when people take me for his daughter, but *my* ambition is to look like a dignified matron: so let me introduce you to my eldest daughter."

She lifted up a pretty little girl of five years old as she spoke, and desired her to shake hands with Frank. "I'll bring the other three over to see you some day," she added.

Little Ethel was, however, rather alarmed by Frank's pale face and sharpened features, and shrank back. Her mother, with quick tact, put her down instantly, saying, "There! Run away, silly child! Gentlemen never want to be troubled with shy little girls."

"I don't wonder I scared her," said Frank, good-naturedly. "I know I look a horrible object. We'll manage better when you bring them all over to Throstlethwaite. How is Quiz this morning, Ruth?"

Ruth was standing silently by the carriage while her parents and Colonel Kennedy were talking to Mrs. L'Es-trange a few paces off, and Leonard was attending to the vicar, who had joined the group. Leonard had made no attempt to engross Ruth; after the first greeting, they had, in fact, scarcely spoken to each other,—for words were not needed between them, and, indeed, could not have been conveniently exchanged. Ruth, when thus appealed to, gave a report of Quiz; but it was not easy to her to be gay and unconstrained as she answered. She could not shake off the recollection of all that had been suggested to her mind, and it made her feel miserably treacherous and guilty towards the poor boy, who was as openly and unaffectedly fond of her as if she had been really his sister, and who showed such thorough confidence in her affection.

Frank's attention was, however, now caught by the conversation going on among the elders about Mr. Bailey's death and the choice of a successor. He raised his voice. "Has mother told you my plan, Mr. Charteris?" he said. "And what do you say to it?"

The whole party drew nearer to the carriage as Mr. Charteris answered Frank's appeal.

"It is rather romantic, I think, Frank, and not very likely to come to anything. But it can do no harm for

Leonard to go in search of your friend ; and, even if he doesn't find an agent for your mother, he may find a pleasant guest to enliven you."

"If he finds Stephen Powys, and he is to be had as an agent, I am sure we may think ourselves awfully lucky," replied Frank, resolutely.

"Powys!" said Colonel Kennedy. "Is the man you have been speaking of that young Powys of Chelsfield, the son of the banker who came to grief some years ago!"

"Yes," answered Mrs. L'Estrange. "His little brother was at school with my boy long ago, and their childish admiration for this elder brother was something of hero-worship."

"And with very fair justification, I should fancy," said Colonel Kennedy.

"You know him? Can you tell us where he is?" cried Frank, with eager interest.

"Not in the least, I am sorry to say," was the reply. "I knew him slightly seven years ago, and thought him a very fine young fellow. My regiment was at Chelsfield when the bank smashed, and of course it was the talk of the neighborhood for the time. Young Powys came out uncommonly well, I remember ; and if he has grown up according to his promise then, and can be found, and is at liberty, I should think that you will be well repaid for the trouble of looking for him."

"But do you really know nothing of what became of him, or where he is likely to be?" asked Frank.

"Really nothing. We were just leaving Chelsfield, and I have not happened to hear anything of him since. I have been very little in England, you know. I remember hearing at the time—and it was the only fault people seemed able to find—that he had refused one or two

rather good offers of help, and was carrying his independence farther than was quite rational or quite worthy of him. He seemed bent on fighting his own way, out of sight; and it was thought a pity, I know, that he should waste his powers in obscure drudgery to earn daily bread, when more than one good start in a promising career was offered him."

"That certainly sounds more like a would-be hero than a man of good sense and knowledge of the world," said Mr. Charteris. "But never mind, Frank. Have the hero fished up, by all means, and then we will sit in judgment on him, and see if he has got over his heroics and settled down into common sense enough to be the right man for your mother."

Mrs. L'Estrange had turned to speak to the vicar, and to offer him a seat in the carriage as far as the village, near which his house was, so that she did not hear this; and Ruth thought that she herself was the only one who saw the slight shadow of disappointment which clouded Frank's eyes for a moment. With the quickened sensitiveness produced by illness, he felt that Mr. Charteris was only good-naturedly humoring what he really thought a foolish whim, and that his view was probably shared by all the others. The cheery bluntness which was meant so well had somehow jarred Frank's nerves, as even the faintest touch of ridicule always does jar any strong feeling.

Quite unconscious of what he had done, Mr. Charteris moved a few steps away, and began to speak to Daniel about the horses.

Ruth, instinctively guessing that if her sister were to say anything on the same subject she might most innocently make matters worse, was about to speak herself, when, to her surprise, Colonel Kennedy, leaning quietly

on the door of the carriage, said, as if he were merely continuing the conversation,—

“I don’t fancy young Powys was a ‘would-be’ anything. False heroism of that sort is apt to commend itself to very young men with great qualities, but who are still in the rough.”

Frank, gratified by this respectful treatment of his fancy, answered, with a smile,—

“But why should it be *false* heroism? Surely, to bear your own burdens without any fuss about them is the best thing that can be done in such a fix?”

“Yes; even if your burden were to be that of submitting to be unwillingly indebted to other people,” replied Colonel Kennedy. “In calling it false heroism, I must own that I was begging the question rather unwarrantably, perhaps; for I was assuming that the facts were such as they were generally reported. The right or the wrong in such cases depends, of course, entirely upon the circumstances; but if a young man with noble gifts, from some impulse of pride or bitterness, rejects the help which would enable him to use those powers to the utmost, don’t you think he is taking rather a serious responsibility upon himself?”

“It would not have occurred to me,” said Frank, with his boyish ingenuousness. “One doesn’t think about things in that way, you know.”

“You shirked the sermon *in* church, Frank,” here interposed Mrs. Kennedy; “but you see you are not to be allowed to escape. It isn’t fair, Nigel, really!”

“I like it,” said Frank, quickly. “But you know, Colonel Kennedy, if one didn’t want to be under an obligation to anybody, one would refuse to be helped straight off, without thinking about responsibility or anything else; and, once done, it couldn’t be undone.”

"Exactly. In such cases it is merely a yielding to impulse, and has nothing to do with heroism. If the chance of an opening in life is rejected reluctantly and for good reasons, then whoever does it is perhaps a true hero, and, we will hope, always reaps the reward of his sacrifice to duty later in life. But if it is only done from a false spirit of independence,—from temper, in fact,—he himself in after-life would probably be the first to tell you that he had been a young fool, and had never ceased to regret it."

"I shall believe that Stephen Powys had good reasons, until I know the contrary," said Frank.

"It is very possible. I know nothing of the circumstances in detail. And, anyhow, one might well make allowances for much graver faults of judgment in a youth of two- or three-and-twenty under the influence of the shock of such a sudden shattering of every prospect in life."

"Yes, indeed!" exclaimed his wife. "My dear Nigel, a boy of two-and-twenty warranted free from all errors of judgment would be the most insufferable prig conceivable; and you, of all people, would wish to knock him down immediately."

"He would be all the better for it, I dare say," quietly answered her husband, moving, as he spoke, to make way for Mrs. L'Estrange, who was beginning to think that Frank would be tired, and that it would be wise to go.

"Then you'll come over to Throstlethwaite soon, Agatha, and bring all the children to see us?" said Frank to Mrs. Kennedy, as they were driving off. "And *you'll* come, too,—will you not?" he added, looking at her husband.

"Yes, certainly. I shall be very glad to come," was the reply.

The Monksholme party sauntered slowly up the path through the fields towards the house.

"What a grievous pity!" said Agatha. "Poor Frank! Such a fine boy as he was, too, and with such a splendid prospect!"

"It is a bad business," said Mr. Charteris, sadly.

"But how very odd to have kept him here all the winter!" said Agatha. "Not even to have tried a foreign climate!—Not that it would really have done any good, I suppose."

"There has never been a time when it would have been even possible to try it," said her mother; "or you may be sure it would have been done. He was perfectly well all summer and autumn. He left Eton in July, and was to go to Oxford after Christmas, reading meanwhile at home with a tutor. He got wet through and thoroughly chilled on one of the first days of November, when he was staying with the Allonbys, neglected to take any precautions, and came home a day or two afterwards with a bad feverish cold. They had been shooting in low marshy ground, and he had caught fever as well as cold, I believe; anyhow, poor boy, he was dangerously ill for weeks with inflammation of the lungs, and every kind of complication. He never left his bed till after Christmas, and to have moved him would have been impossible. Since that, he has rallied a little, as you see; but no change could be of any use, and a journey might kill him at once. There is serious heart-disease, and it is only a question of time. It may end at any time, or he may linger for a few weeks, or even months."

"It is terrible for his mother," said Agatha. Then in a moment she added, lightly, "Well, proverbs may be vulgar, but how true they often are! It *is* an ill wind that blows nobody good. For I suppose in this case there is

no doubt that Leonard will just take Frank's place at Throstlethwaite. What a change for him, after having next to nothing, to become the heir to such a property as that is now! Of course it is a dreadful thing for Mrs. L'Estrange; but, as far as the outer world is concerned, I dare say Leonard will do just as well as Frank; and of course he will take the name?"

"Everything will be entirely in Mrs. L'Estrange's power," said Mr. Charteris, stopping for a moment as he walked in front with his son-in-law; "and I do not suppose she has yet given a thought to the future."

His tone implied that speculation about it was premature, and distasteful to him.

Ruth turned abruptly away, unable to endure the discussion, and proposed to her little niece, who had already made friends with her, to run on and join the group of babies, nurses, and perambulators which was visible near the house.

"We say as little about it all as possible, my dear," said Mrs. Charteris, falling a little way behind the gentlemen with Agatha, and speaking in a low, confidential tone.

"Ah! I thought that wasn't an unlikely complication," said Agatha, with ready comprehension of her mother's glance at Ruth as she ran on with little Ethel.

"It has been a great anxiety to me ever since he came back last summer," said Mrs. Charteris.

"I don't wonder, mamma. But, in that case, all this really must be a great relief to you. I should not fancy Ruth would be very easy to guide in such matters; romantic, isn't she, and rather willful? But of course Leonard, *with Throstlethwaite*, is all that could be wished?"

"Yes, exactly. But, Agatha, my dear, your father would not like anything of the kind to be said, I am sure——"

Agatha laughed.

"Oh, of course not! Nor would Nigel. Men like the privilege of being blind as long as there is any awkwardness. I quite understand."

Agatha Kennedy was herself perfectly happy and prosperous, and other people's troubles sat very lightly on her spirits. She was never considered hard or cold, for she had always ready sympathy to bestow,—a feeling not too deep or strong to be easily and gracefully expressed, and which passed as quickly as it came, leaving no trace; but, though it was momentary, it was genuine, and therefore produced the desired impression. She was worldly, but she was rarely called so, because her natural good taste prevented her from expressing her views on unsuitable occasions, while, even to congenial hearers, they were skillfully shrouded in playful nonsense. She was willful, but she did not appear to be so; for she had the art of apparently submitting to others with the most graceful sweetness, while in reality managing to do exactly as she chose.

Her marriage had not been a worldly one, inasmuch as it was perfectly well known that she had refused one offer, at least, which would have given her both wealth and rank. But, though she would never have married a man she did *not* like for the sake of his position, Agatha Charteris would certainly never have dreamed of allowing herself to fall in love imprudently.

She was two-and-twenty when she met Nigel Kennedy, and he was twelve years older,—a difference which she rather liked. His connections were extremely good. He was an eldest son, with large estates in Scotland entailed upon him, and, though his father had married a second time, and, oppressed by the necessity of providing for a large family, was not inclined to be liberal, Agatha's

judgment was quite satisfied with the prospect he had to offer. They would not be rich at first, but neither would they be poor; and Captain Kennedy was certain to get on, for he was clever, and he had interest. She really liked him; she was proud of him, and flattered by his affection for herself, and she rather enjoyed the thoughts of a little variety of life before settling down at the family place in Scotland. That variety came in a pleasant form.

When first they married, Captain Kennedy's regiment was at Malta; but in a few months he obtained a good staff appointment under an uncle who was made governor of one of our most important colonies. This uncle, being unmarried, much attached to his nephew, and much charmed with that nephew's wife, wished them to live with him; and thus it had fallen to Agatha to do the honors of Government House, and to enjoy all the privileges of vice-queenship, except the formal dignities and duties, which would have been only a restraint and a burden.

She acquitted herself well. Her manners were perfect; her dress was always beyond criticism, and yet never extravagant; she had perfect health and spirits; her children were thoroughly well cared for, but never allowed to be obtrusive; and, while she contrived always to select her intimates from the best people, she managed to avoid any appearance of neglecting the more insignificant.

Prosperous, successful, and brilliant in society, while yet really attached to her husband and children, Agatha was thoroughly happy and satisfied, and it had never even crossed her mind that there was any flaw in the perfection of her married life. Nigel was kind and affectionate, he admired her and was amused by her, and it

had never occurred to her that she was not all he had intended her to be.

Sir Everard Kennedy's term of government being now over, the Nigel Kennedys had returned to England to await some other appointment, and, meanwhile, to visit the relations whom they had not seen since their marriage, six years before.

CHAPTER VII.

THE moon in this particular instance justified Daniel's faith in "her quarters." The fine weather continued unbroken for some time, and "Mr. Campbell's new-fangled nonsense" was considered to have been triumphantly refuted.

A fortnight passed quickly, with frequent meetings between Monksholme and Throstlethwaite.

Frank continued in much the same state, and was able to enjoy the variety which the arrival of the Kennedys occasioned. Agatha amused him, and he liked to watch the children at play, and to make friends with them; but his great pleasure was in getting Ruth and Colonel Kennedy over to Throstlethwaite without any of the others, and listening to them as they talked with his mother.

Colonel Kennedy was much too kind not to have complied with Frank's wish to see him, even had he found it tiresome to go; but in fact it was as pleasant a way of spending an afternoon as he could desire. A ride or a row down to Throstlethwaite with Ruth, and an hour or two spent there with Mrs. L'Estrange and Frank, could

certainly not be looked upon as any sacrifice, even though it happened two or three times a week.

The plan of sending Leonard in search of Stephen Powys had been carried out. Mrs. L'Estrange had arranged with Mr. Nichols that he should have a few days' leave, and he had gone up to London in the middle of that same week. He wrote in a day or two to say that he had been to Mr. Hillyer's chambers, but that he was out of town for a few days. The clerk could give no information about Mr. Powys, and he was therefore waiting until Mr. Hillyer should return.

Another letter followed in about a week, which effectually put an end to all idea of the success of Frank's scheme. Leonard wrote that he had seen Mr. Hillyer, who, however, had not heard from Mr. Powys for a considerable time, and, though he knew that he had left Devonshire, could not give his present address. When last he had heard from him, he was in treaty for some employment in America. Leonard added that, under these circumstances, he was returning at once to Edensor, as further inquiries would be useless. He would come over to Throstlethwaite as usual on Saturday afternoon.

On Saturday, exactly a fortnight after the day on which Ruth had rowed down to Throstlethwaite for the first time that summer and on which the Kennedys had arrived at Monksholme, she set out for a long ride with her brother-in-law, who was now her usual companion.

On this particular afternoon they had arranged to ride entirely round the lake of Brideswater, going first to Thornbeck (for there was no road across the valley near the head of the lake), and so round by Carlsgill and Otter's Bridge to Throstlethwaite, where they would stop for afternoon tea, and come home at their leisure after-

wards. It was a long ride, altogether about twenty miles, but Ruth thought nothing of it, and it was a delicious afternoon; so they set off soon after two, intending to reach Throstlethwaite (where, however, they were not expected) a little before five.

When they passed the "Otter" inn, about half-past four, they found things there in the usual Saturday afternoon confusion. Several unguarded carts were standing at the door, waiting while their owners refreshed themselves within; and it seemed probable (if the condition of one farmer who was just starting again might be taken as a sample of what that of the others was likely to be) that a safe return home would in most cases be due to the instinctive discretion of the horses rather than to that of their masters.

"I have a message to give here," said Ruth. "You won't mind stopping for a moment, Nigel?"

Of course Colonel Kennedy did not mind, and Ruth, steering Zoe daintily through the carts, rode up to the door, which was standing wide open, and rattled upon it with the handle of her whip. A good-looking landlady made her appearance, and, after an interchange of friendly greetings, Ruth said,—

"I only called, Mrs. Dobson, to ask you about Polly Nixon. You said, the other day, that you thought she would be better away from the inn, and that you would like to get her a place where she would be well looked after. My sister, Mrs. Kennedy, wants an under nurse. The upper one is a steady, sensible woman, and an excellent servant. Would Polly suit, do you think?"

Mrs. Dobson had listened to all Ruth had to say in silence, but with a rising color; and she now broke forth into a torrent of excited words, from which Ruth gathered by degrees that Polly (an orphan niece of Isaac Dobson's,

whom he and his wife had brought up, having no children of their own) was no longer at the inn; that she and her aunt had had a great many "words" lately about her idle, careless ways and forward flirting with all the men about the place. There had been "a deal of unpleasantness," reaching a climax the day before, apropos of a young man who had been staying at the inn for a few days fishing, and had amused himself by making love to Polly, who was certainly pretty enough to make his doing so quite comprehensible.

There had been a violent scene the previous evening between Polly and the Dobsons, and the result of it was that the next morning she went off with this gentleman, leaving a rude, saucy note for her aunt, saying that she "would never darken their doors again, and that Mr. Trevor was going to take her to London and make a lady of her."

"A nice sort of a lady she'll be!" concluded the angry aunt. "She'll just go from bad to worse, and no help for it. I'm sorry, too, for she wasn't a bad-hearted lass if she hadn't been that eat up with vanity and nonsense that she was past bearing. She's done for herself now, anyway, and many's the time she'll rue, poor silly lass!"

"I am very, very sorry to hear it," said Ruth, "and I am afraid, indeed, there is no good ending to be hoped for. Poor Polly! She was so pretty and bright."

"Ay. She was good enough to look at, and that's all the men thinks of: she could do as she pleased with any of them, and it fairly turned her head. There's Joe Fisher, poor lad, nearly out of his senses with hearing she's gone off. I knew he'd take it to heart, for he's been clean daft about her for ever so long, and though she'd no call to go fighting on with all the men about the place when she'd promised *him*, he'd never hear a word

agen' her. I thought to go over to Throstlethwaite to-night and get him told quietly, but I couldn't leave the inn of a Saturday afore dark, with all the market-folk astir; and he came in, a quarter of an hour back, just crazed. He'd met Tim Fletcher and heard about it, and came tearing on here to know if it was true."

"Poor Joe!" said Ruth, compassionately.

"I'm sorry for him too, poor silly lad," said Mrs. Dobson. "Not but what he's well rid of her, if he'd only see it! However, he wouldn't own to believing it anyway, and held to it that it was all her nonsense after we'd been hard on her, and that she'd likely just gone over the hill to her aunt's in Lingdale, to give us a fright for a bit; and then he went right off like mad up the wood, Lingdale way, to go and find out."

Calls from within the inn for Mrs. Dobson were becoming impatient, and after a few more words on either side she returned to her duties, and Ruth and Colonel Kennedy rode slowly on. In former days Mrs. Dobson had been housekeeper at Monksholme, and since her marriage to the landlord of the "Otter" much friendly communication had been kept up, so that Ruth had known Polly Nixon ever since the Dobsons had adopted her when she was ten years old, now nine years ago.

"That seems a baddish business," said Colonel Kennedy. "Between the niece's vanity and the aunt's temper, they have made a mess of it."

"Mrs. Dobson has a temper, and what they call 'a rough tongue,'" replied Ruth; "but she is a good, kind woman, and meant well by Polly, though her management might not be very judicious. She has been anxious about her for some time, and thought the inn a bad place for her, and wished to send her to service."

"I should think our nursery was as well without the

young lady," said Colonel Kennedy. "She would have been in her glory in a garrison town."

Ruth laughed; but she answered, seriously, "I had not thought of that. But I am really very sorry for poor Joe. He is the groom at Throstlethwaite, you know,—old Daniel's son,—and he was desperately in love with this girl. I am afraid it will altogether upset him, poor fellow; for, though he is an excellent servant, he is 'just a bit soft,' as they say."

She stopped suddenly, for at a turn in the road, about a couple of hundred yards from the inn, they came upon a low basket carriage, drawn by a handsome bay pony. It was standing quite still at one side of the road, close under the bank. Ruth checked Zoe instantly in surprise and dismay, for Frank L'Estrange was alone in the carriage, leaning back among his cushions, with the reins in his hands. Ruth knew that during the last few days of fine weather, when it had been safe for him to venture beyond the grounds, he had used this pony-carriage instead of his garden-chair, but she was utterly astonished to find him here quite alone.

"You here, Frank!" she exclaimed. "And quite by yourself! How very imprudent! Where is Daniel?"

"It's all right!" replied Frank, coolly. "Have you been round the lake?"

"Yes; and we were coming to Throstlethwaite to beg for some tea."

"You're a couple of bricks!" was Frank's answer. "Mother isn't at home to-day. She went to Edenford this morning about some business; and she and Leonard are coming back together by the later train,—Thornbeck way, you know,—it isn't due here till near seven; but you'll come all the same, and have tea with me now?"

"Yes; of course," said Ruth. "But where *is* Daniel, Frank? You ought not to be here alone."

"Don't fuss about nothing, Ruth. There's no need; I'm all right. Daniel's safe at home with a gouty hand, poor old boy, and Joe is out with me. We weren't coming this way; but we met Tim Fletcher on the bridge, and he was—'well, not to say droonk,' " said the boy, in admirable dialect, "but pretty well on the way to it. He blurted out a story of Polly Nixon's having gone off with some gentleman. It's all bosh, no doubt; but Joe was in such a taking, I really couldn't help driving this way, and sending him to find out about it; only, as I didn't fancy standing in front of the 'Otter,' I stopped here to wait for him."

"You ought both to have had more sense," said Ruth, indignantly. "Joe should never have left you. You know if anything started that pony, you couldn't hold him; and, even if you could, nothing could be worse for you than such an exertion."

"Fritz isn't thinking of starting," responded Frank. "He is nearly as sleepy as I was till you came, with the delicious smell of this bank of whins. Joe is sure to be back in a minute."

Colonel Kennedy during this discussion had quietly dismounted, and was standing at Fritz's head, holding his own horse also.

Ruth briefly repeated Mrs. Dobson's story, including the fact of Joe's sudden start for Lingdale, forgetting that his master was waiting for him.

"Poor Joe!" said Frank. "I'm sure he may be excused for forgetting me for a while."

"Perhaps," answered Ruth. "But the question is, what must be done now? We cannot guess how long it may be before Joe comes to his senses, and we cannot

leave you here alone on the road when every other cart that passes goes zigzagging all over the place ! Nigel, if you don't mind leading Zoe on to Throstlethwaite for me, I'll drive this boy home."

"The best plan," said Colonel Kennedy ; and he moved a few steps away from the carriage to hold Zoe's head while Ruth dismounted. The plan might be a good one, but it was not destined to be carried out yet awhile ; for, almost as Colonel Kennedy spoke, the noise of an approaching train reached them. The railroad was not in sight, but it was very near them ; and as long as that peculiar sound was audible, Zoe chose to plunge and caper, so that it was quite impossible for Ruth to get off. She sat there half laughing.

"Was there ever such a silly creature ?" she said, with some impatience. "She isn't a bit frightened ; it is pure affectation ; but as long as she hears a train she considers herself entitled to dance !"

Colonel Kennedy's own horse, though not emulating Zoe, was sufficiently restless to make him feel it wiser to keep a little away from the carriage ; and he did so the less reluctantly that Fritz stood calmly surveying the antics of the other horses without any apparent wish to imitate them.

Tranquillity being restored, Ruth jumped off. She was holding Zoe for the moment required by Colonel Kennedy to mount his own horse again before he took her rein, when unfortunately a man passed driving some pigs. Half an idiot at his best, he was now a good deal the worse for drink, and as he passed he hit out idly with the long whip he carried, and struck Fritz sharply. With an indignant toss of his head the pony started off at a quick trot, and was out of reach before either Ruth or Colonel Kennedy could catch the reins.

Both were in their saddles again, they hardly knew how,

and in a moment were following the carriage, though cautiously, for fear of making matters worse. Frank, quite as aware as Ruth could be that Fritz must be stopped, if possible, before his own excitement increased his pace so as to be quite beyond control, sat up and did his best with both wrist and voice. He succeeded beyond their expectations, and before they reached the turn on to Otter's Bridge, the carriage was again standing still.

All danger of accident was over; but Ruth had other and worse fears. She sprang off her horse and flung the reins to Colonel Kennedy, saying, "You must manage them all three, Nigel;" and the next moment was by Frank's side in the carriage.

He greeted her with a triumphant smile, but almost instantly the flush on his face changed to a deadly pallor, and the attack of violent pain and breathlessness which Ruth had dreaded came upon him. The unusual exertion and excitement had quickened the circulation beyond what the weakened and diseased heart could bear.

Ruth had fortunately more than once been present during similar though less severe attacks; she knew what to do, and she did it promptly, though with an agony of dread, which almost paralyzed her, lest he should die there on the road, when his mother was far away. She knew that he was never allowed to go out in his chair without the necessary remedies being taken with him. Of course, therefore, the case containing them was certain to be in the carriage. She soon found it, and all that the tenderest care could do she did for Frank.

To get help was impossible, for Colonel Kennedy, with two horses to hold and the pony to keep still, had enough to do.

At length the pain subsided, the gasping breath came more naturally, and Frank, though terribly exhausted, was

safe again,—for the time. He tried to speak some word of thanks to Ruth, but she laid her finger on his lips instantly.

“Not a syllable, Frank! Keep perfectly still. I’ll drive on now, Nigel. We shall be at the house in a few minutes. Keep close to us,” she added, meaningly.

Colonel Kennedy understood her. She could not be confident that there would be no return of pain, and he must be at hand. They reached Throstlethwaite, however, quickly and safely, and were immediately surrounded by a group of astonished, frightened servants. Colonel Kennedy’s imperative sign for silence and prompt unquestioning obedience was not resisted.

Frank was carried at once to his couch in the drawing-room, and carefully settled there by the butler, who always waited upon him.

Ruth remained with him, thankful beyond the power of words to see him lying there, white and exhausted it might be, but evidently better and more comfortable with each succeeding minute. Even when Colonel Kennedy came in, and Palmer brought the tea, and all was apparently much as usual again, Ruth insisted on Frank’s keeping perfectly quiet.

It was getting late: the drawing-room clock had chimed six, and Ruth moved to the most distant window with a glance at Colonel Kennedy to follow her.

“I can’t leave him, Nigel, till Mrs. L’Estrange is here.”

“Certainly not,” was the ready reply; “and I shall not leave you alone here. I have already sent a messenger to Monksholme, with a note explaining how things stand. We can ride home by moonlight, after dinner, quite well.”

Ruth nodded gratefully. She appreciated his quiet, prompt decision.

"Hatching treason, Ruth!" said Frank, as she returned to him.

"No. Only an invitation to dinner," she replied, with a smile. "We are not going to trust you to your own foolish devices again, and mean to stay and see you safe into your mother's charge, and ride home in the evening."

Frank smiled, well pleased; then the next moment he exclaimed,—

"How about meeting mother at the station? Daniel can't drive; and even if Joe should have come home by that time, he wouldn't be fit to drive the carriage."

He pulled the cord attached to the bell, which was always placed within his reach, as he spoke.

Palmer came instantly.

"Has Joe come back yet?" Frank said.

"No, sir." And Palmer's tone and manner implied that no pleasant welcome would await Joe when he did return.

"Then who is going to the station?"

"Well, sir, there isn't nobody to drive the carriage; but we thought if one of the men took the pony over in the basket-cart, that Mr. Leonard could drive missis home, and she wouldn't mind, seeing how things is with us."

"No. That would do. Only whoever goes will frighten her so by telling her a lot of rubbish. You had better go yourself, Palmer. You've more sense than the rest, and would stick to facts."

The compliment was gratifying; but Palmer looked at Ruth, and, encouraged by her evidently agreeing with him, boldly refused.

"I would go, sir, in a minute; but missis would never forgive me for leaving the house when you were ill. I really couldn't do it."

"Quite right, Palmer," said Colonel Kennedy. "Look

here, Frank. Don't fidget, and I'll go over for your mother myself. The sight of me won't frighten her, and I will promise you to tell her only the most prosy facts possible."

This settled the difficulty; but Frank had still something to say.

"I want to speak to Daniel, Palmer,—*now*; and come back with him."

"Oh, Frank! *Do* keep quiet!" said Ruth.

"You didn't ought to talk, sir," said Palmer.

But Frank insisted.

Colonel Kennedy said, quickly, "Let him have his own way," and Palmer obeyed.

"You are quite right, my boy," said Colonel Kennedy, going up to the couch. "But very few words will say what, if I guess right, you want said; and, for your mother's sake, do all you can to avoid a fresh attack before she comes home. You are not out of the wood yet."

Palmer now came back with Daniel.

Frank felt the force of what Colonel Kennedy had said; for he was evidently already tired, and spoke rather brokenly and feebly.

"I shan't be any worse after a bit, Daniel," he said, holding out a hand to the old man. "I sent for you to say that I won't have Joe row'd for leaving me. I sent him myself. What he heard was enough to put him off his head and make him forget me; and even if it does make me ill again, I won't have him blamed. If you're hard on him, Daniel, he'll be going to the bad—anyway, I won't have it! When he comes back, I'll see him, please. And, Palmer, you just make them all understand that if ever I hear of anybody saying a word to Joe about it, whoever it is will go."

Palmer, with due gravity, answered,—

“Very good, sir. I’ll see to it.”

And then he hurried Daniel (to whom calm speech would have been impossible) out of the room.

Colonel Kennedy followed, for it was nearly time to go to the station, and Ruth and Frank were left alone together.

CHAPTER VIII.

DESIRING Frank to try to sleep, Ruth took up a book, and seated herself by one of the windows. Frank, however, lay in perfect silence, with his eyes closed, so that she need not even pretend to read in order to keep him quiet; and her book soon lay forgotten on her lap, while sad thoughts followed each other quickly through her mind.

It was only two days since Dr. Jervis of Edenford had told her father that, “With good luck, young L’Estrange might live several months yet, and with quite as much enjoyment of life as he was capable of at present. The disease seemed to have paused, and he was so admirably cared for that very likely he might see the summer through.” Ruth had heard this, and had rejoiced in it and believed it, for it was a long time since he had had any bad attack, and he was indeed so carefully watched and guarded that it seemed scarcely possible for any disturbing element to enter his life.

Yet now, in a moment, all was undone. The tender care, the minute precautions of his mother’s watchful love, had all been unavailing to shield him from accident. A thoughtless girl’s heartless, wicked folly,—a weak man’s

want of self-control and courage,—an irresponsible idiot's crazy act in the mere instinct of purposeless mischief,—and the chain was complete. Would Polly Nixon ever know all the consequences of her unprincipled flight? If she did, would she care? Somehow, Ruth could not help fearing the worst from this attack. She knew that even a slight one was extremely bad for him; this had been very severe, and she could see that it had taken great hold of him. It was not unlikely to return; and, if it did, there could be little hope, she fancied. She listened with feverish impatience for the sound of the train passing on the other side of the lake, and bringing back his mother. She had gone to Edenford on important business; but it was the first time she had left him since his illness, and Ruth shrank with horror from the thought of the shock that might have been awaiting her on her return, had not she herself and Colonel Kennedy chanced to be in the way just at the moment of danger.

There was something inexpressibly painful to Ruth, too, in Frank himself being the only person to be ignorant of the truth as to his state. *She* was longing passionately for his mother's arrival, in dread with every passing minute lest the pain should return and his strength prove unequal to the struggle it must cause, while *he* had summed up his view of his own condition in a few half-laughing words to her as she had settled his pillows when Colonel Kennedy left them.

"What a lot of bother I give you all by being so slow in getting strong! It makes one feel such a fool to go on like this just with stopping a bit of a pony! It's rather jolly too, though, to be taken such care of, and I'll pay you with interest some day, Ruth!"

Clearly he understood nothing of the silent anguish which had torn his mother's heart for so long. He

thought himself merely "slow in getting strong," when any moment might be the last ! What good could it have done to tell him the truth,—gentle, thoughtful, and pure-minded as he was? It was a question not easily answered.

The inevitable shock and agitation of such a disclosure, however tenderly made, must have been a risk,—might even have shortened the time of which every day and hour was so precious to his mother ; and the open acknowledgment that the moment of parting was so near must for her have added much to the difficulty of calm endurance. All true ; and yet Ruth felt that there was something almost treacherous and dishonorable in every one but himself knowing what so nearly concerned him.

The silence had lasted for nearly half an hour, when suddenly Frank spoke. "Ruth, come here."

She was by his side in a moment.

"You are not ill again, are you?"

"No. But that was a nasty half-hour by the bridge there, Ruth, and takes a good bit of getting over. I feel rather as if it might come back, too, and that would be a bad look-out. If I am in for being really ill again as I was last autumn, it would be no joke, you know. Old Jervis and that London swell mother had down, pulled awfully long faces over me, I know. I don't think at one time they expected me to get over it ; but I did ; and lately I've been getting strong quite fast. I meant to ride again next week. But if this makes me ill again, I don't know what might come of it. I'm not so strong yet as I was before I was ill, by a good bit, and I mightn't pull through a second time, you see. If I didn't—it would be awfully hard lines for mother——?"

There was something of interrogation in his tone. A faint suspicion of the truth had dawned upon him at last. Ruth could not answer. She dared not tell him how it

really was with him, even if the words would have come to her; but she could not—she would not attempt to deceive him. She stooped over him and put his hair back from his forehead, like the gentle, tender elder sister she had always been to him.

“It is hard for her and for us all to see you suffer, Frank, though you are so good and patient.”

Perhaps nothing could have broken the truth to him more effectually than her inability to answer his question. He caught both her hands before she could move away, and said, for him, rather sharply, “Ruth, look at me!”

She obeyed, and, though conscious that large tears were slowly rising to her eyes, she met his steadily.

The next moment he dropped her hands and lay back upon his pillows again. She saw that he understood, though he said nothing; and she moved away from him and stood by the fire, conscious chiefly of a horrible dread of the immediate physical effect of such a sudden perception of the truth. He was, however, perfectly quiet, and in a few minutes more Mrs. L'Estrange came in with Colonel Kennedy and Leonard.

Frank greeted his mother merrily, but he did not attempt to speak much, and made no protest when she said that he must not think of coming in to dinner, but must have what he wanted quietly in the drawing-room, and rest until they all joined him afterwards.

Then she carried Ruth off up-stairs to make such preparation for dinner as was in her power; and, as Leonard and Colonel Kennedy also went away for the same purpose, Frank was left alone.

When the two ladies joined him again after dinner, which they did as soon as it was possible, they found him apparently comfortable, and very cheerful, ready to ask questions about his mother's day at Edenford. She had

gone there chiefly to see the bishop of the diocese, for she wished to build and endow a church and school at Kester's Hill, where her iron-works were. Both were greatly needed for the increased population of the roughest kind, and the scheme had been for many months under consideration, but some technical difficulties had arisen, and Mrs. L'Estrange had at length found it necessary to go and talk the matter over with the bishop, and Frank was interested in hearing how she had prospered.

Colonel Kennedy and Leonard came in before she had quite finished telling him all she had done.

"Well," said Frank, soon afterwards, "I wish you could have had Stephen Powys to help you through it all, mother! It is a great deal for you to have to manage for yourself. And so you really could hear nothing of him, Leonard?"

"Only what I wrote to Aunt Margaret," replied Leonard. "From what Mr. Hillyer said, I dare say he would have turned out the right man if there had been a reasonable chance of finding him; but America was rather too vague."

"Well, yes,—rather!" replied Frank, laughing. "But I'm sorry. He would have helped you so capitally, mother, and would have seen things the right way up and understood what you wished. He would have gone in for the sense of responsibility line about property, I know, and not have thought, like poor old Bailey, that saving your money was always the greatest duty in life. However, it can't be helped."

"No, indeed," said Mrs. L'Estrange. "And I have heard to-day of a gentleman who seems promising. He is rather young, but well recommended, and Leonard knows him, and thinks him quite likely to be the sort of man we want."

"Wodehouse was at Oxford with me," said Leonard, in answer to Frank's questioning glance. "He is a good fellow and clever, and has been training for land-agent work. You thought his references satisfactory, Aunt Margaret, did you not? If the business part of the affair is all right, I am sure you will like him personally."

"I shall write to ask him to come down here to see me before I inquire further," said Mrs. L'Estrange; "but I think he seems promising."

The entrance of the servants with coffee now stopped the discussion, and Palmer created a diversion by announcing that Isaac Dobson had come over from the "Otter," bringing Joe Fisher home.

Joe had gone quite over into Lingdale, before he remembered in how helpless and dangerous a position he had left his master. He had returned at once in great alarm, to look for him, but it was then seven o'clock, and of course he had found no trace of the carriage where he had left it. Too much frightened to go home, he had gone to the "Otter" to see if anything was known about it there. He had there heard what had happened,—told in the blunt, rough country fashion, which makes no allowance for weak natures, and with considerable exaggeration of Frank's present condition. Distress, self-reproach, and fear combined were too much for him: he was quite "off his head," Isaac Dobson reported, and he had been obliged to come himself to get him back to Throstlethwaite at all. As it was, he was in far too great a state of excitement and exhaustion to be in the least fit to come in to speak to Frank, as he had desired.

"Poor Joe!" was Frank's comment, after all this had been extracted from Palmer. "Well, I'll see him to-morrow morning—tell him so; or, stay—Leonard, I wish *you* would go out and speak to him, and tell him I'm all right

again now, and that we'll have another drive to-morrow, if it's fine. I know he's sure to be awfully cut up at having left me, and he has enough to bear without that."

Leonard rose readily to comply.

"I'll see him, and make his mind easy; but you're a great deal too good-natured, Frank."

The moon did not rise till after nine, and it was half-past before Ruth and Colonel Kennedy left Throstlethwaite. Frank had waited till they were gone, before being taken to his room; and, while his mother was saying a few last words to Colonel Kennedy in the hall, he called Ruth back after she had said "Good-night" to him.

Drawing her down towards him as he lay on his sofa, he said, almost in a whisper,—

"Ruth, you'll be good to mother! She'll have only you; and you won't let Leonard worry her. He doesn't mean it, but he does sometimes; and you'll make it right, and help her——"

A multitude of conflicting emotions made it almost impossible for Ruth to speak. She stooped and softly kissed his forehead, as she answered, "I will do all I can;" and then she hurried to join the others in the hall, conscious only that she must not let her self-command fail her.

The hall door was open, the horses were pawing the gravel outside in the moonlight, servants were waiting about; Colonel Kennedy was just going out, and Mrs. L'Estrange was standing alone in the lighted hall.

Ruth never afterwards forgot a single detail of the scene. One glance at Mrs. L'Estrange's face, now that she was no longer in Frank's presence, showed that she had seen and understood how much he was changed since the morning, and Ruth felt herself strangely shaken by the perception of the depth of suffering that was so reso-

lutely controlled. No words but those of the commonest leave-taking passed between them, and then Ruth found herself standing by Zoe's side.

Leonard was waiting to help her to mount. She had thought him looking ill all the evening, and now, as the moonlight fell on his face, his paleness almost frightened her. Colonel Kennedy was, however, already beginning to move on, and there was no time to ask questions; she felt, indeed, that none were needed, for, in spite of all previous warnings, Frank's present state seemed to have been produced by some sudden and horrible accident, and Leonard could not but feel the shock more deeply than any one but his aunt. With a silent gesture of farewell, she turned Zoe from the door, and rode up to Colonel Kennedy's side. Neither of them spoke until they had reached the Lodge and passed through the heavy iron gates. The sound of these being closed behind them broke the spell. Ruth shivered, as if the noise jarred every nerve.

"That poor mother! God help her!" said Colonel Kennedy, almost involuntarily; but Ruth did not answer, and they rode home slowly, in unbroken silence. He was surprised, for he was not accustomed to women whose emotions deprived them of all inclination for speech, but he was beginning to understand his sister-in-law; his quick observation had led him to perceive to a great extent the real position of all the actors in this drama towards each other, and his strongest feeling in the matter was one of anxiety for her.

The night was fine. There were heavy masses of white clouds here and there in the sky, sweeping rapidly before a fresh breeze, and breaking occasionally into thin drifts of vapor. The moon was sometimes shining brightly down from an open space of clear sky, lighting up the

lake with large patches of glittering silver broken by deep shadows ; sometimes it was entirely hidden behind the clouds, showing its position only by the brilliant fringe of light edging the masses ; then again it emerged, half veiled by the floating vapor and throwing a faint mysterious light on everything. The changes were rapid and constant,—beautiful, but bewildering to watch ; and Ruth felt as if her thoughts were drifting as helplessly before some irresistible power as the clouds and vapor which she was seeing thus driven before the wind. She was fully convinced that she should not see Frank again. It was the first time she had ever been brought into close personal contact with death, and for the moment it awed her almost beyond grief.

But she could not think,—she could only let ideas pass through her mind as they would,—and the aching sorrow for his mother's suffering which filled her heart for one moment gave place the next to a speculation as to the full meaning of those last words Frank had spoken to her. He had, then, guessed how it was with her and Leonard, for he had implied a certainty that Leonard would succeed to his place at Throstlethwaite, and he had assumed that that involved her being there too. This dying request to her made her feel as if Throstlethwaite would be a legacy from Frank ; the idea of succeeding him there ceased to be intolerable ; and she knew that she, more than any one, could help to lighten the weight of sorrow which Mrs. L'Estrange must henceforward bear. Then again the pity of it all overpowered every other thought, and dreams of future happiness for herself seemed a mockery, in the face of a grief so deep.

On reaching Monksholme, they rode at once into the stable-yard, and then entered the house by a side-door among the offices. A minute later, Ruth pushed open a

swing-door which led into the other part of the house, but she paused there with a sudden shrinking from going on. The house was shut up; the passage was lighted; in the drawing-room Agatha was singing, and her song was a lively coquettish French *chanson*. The contrast was too sudden.

Ruth felt stifled and oppressed, and as if it were impossible to go forward and face all the questions which she would be expected to answer.

"Don't try it," said her brother-in-law, kindly. "You must be quite worn out. I will say that you are tired and have gone to your room."

It was a new sensation to Ruth to feel herself at once understood and quietly cared for.

"Thank you. I think I will escape," she said, gratefully, and went up-stairs at once.

Early the next morning a messenger from Throstlethwaite brought two notes to Monksholme. One was from Leonard Barrington to Mr. Charteris, telling him that Frank had died in the night, suddenly and quietly, without further illness. He added that Mrs. L'Estrange was well, and was bearing it so far with marvelous composure.

The other note was from Mrs. L'Estrange to Ruth, and was very short:

"My darling can suffer no more now; and for that I can be thankful. Soon I will ask you to come to me: meanwhile, pray for me, that I may bear to live."

"M. L'E."

CHAPTER IX.

IF Mrs. L'Estrange could have thought it right to do merely what she liked, she would certainly have asked to have Ruth Charteris with her during the first days after Frank's death ; but she was not one of the people whom sorrow deprives either of their power of judgment or of their sense of duty towards others. She felt that she should not be justified, under the circumstances, in having Ruth and Leonard at Throstlethwaite together, unless she were prepared at once to sanction an engagement between them and make their marriage possible.

This was a point not to be hastily decided ; and, as Leonard's remaining with her for a time was of course inevitable, she must do without the comfort of Ruth's companionship.

Leonard showed himself at his best during that week. He did all that it was in his power to do for his aunt quietly and well. He wrote letters and answered inquiries ; he saved her as much as possible from the consideration of painful details, and showed, throughout, both kindness and tact. There was a good deal of genuine feeling in it, for he had been really fond of Frank in his own way, he was heartily sorry for his aunt's suffering, and he was too impressionable not to be affected by the sadness of it all ; but at the same time there was an ever-present thought of himself, and an intense anxiety to have some assurance that his own hopes for the future were not to be disappointed. He scarcely thought it possible that his aunt

could contemplate any other arrangement than that of giving him at once the position of an adopted son, of her recognized heir, but he longed to *know* that it was to be so.

Frank's death took place on Saturday night; the simple, quiet funeral was on the following Thursday; and in the mean time there was no communication between Monks-holme and Throstlethwaite, except by letter. Neither was there on Friday and Saturday.

On Sunday, Leonard appeared alone at church. He spoke of his aunt very feelingly, and said that, though she was perfectly well, and bore everything with wonderful calmness and courage, he could not help dreading some great reaction when the first conscious necessity for exertion was over and she would have only to realize the blank left by her loss, and to face the dreary monotony of daily life alone. He added that he did not at all like leaving her, as he must do the next day, for the whole of the week.

"Surely you do not think of leaving her to go to the bank?" said Mrs. Charteris. "What can your work there matter, in comparison with your remaining with her?"

There was a shade of constraint in Leonard's tone as he answered,—

"It would matter nothing, of course, if she wished me to stay with her. She would only have to say so. But she has not hinted any such desire; and I cannot suggest it. She knows perfectly well that I must wish to be with her and do what I can for her, but her theory of life is stoical, both for herself and other people. My work is at Edenford; there is no real need for my staying away any longer; therefore, of course, I must go back, however lonely it may leave her. That is her view, I have no doubt." Then, turning to Mr. Charteris, he said, "She

told me to ask if you could come over to see her this afternoon. She would like to see you, as there is something she wishes to consult you about ; but if to-day does not suit you, any other time will do equally well for her."

"Say that I will come this afternoon," replied Mr. Charteris. "There is nothing to prevent me, and I am very glad that she will see me."

Leonard had walked to church, and he now turned into the path leading to Throstlethwaite, leaving the others to continue their way up to Monksholme.

There was a general silence among them. Mrs. Charteris and Agatha were too discreet to begin any discussion of Leonard's position, and no one else felt the least inclination to do so.

Mr. Charteris went over to Throstlethwaite alone that afternoon. Nothing could be more natural than that Mrs. L'Estrange should wish to see him, for they had been all their lives on almost the footing of a brother and sister, and had a true regard for each other, although there had never been any peculiar sympathy between them ; but he was also one of the trustees of the Throstlethwaite property, and there was an undoubting conviction among the whole party at Monksholme that it was some fresh arrangement concerning it about which she wished to consult him. Mrs. Charteris and Agatha speculated cheerfully about it together, for Colonel Kennedy was gone for a long solitary walk, and no one knew where Ruth was.

The past week had been a very trying one to her. Frank's death was a real grief in itself ; she could never for a moment shake off the thought of what his mother must be feeling ; and yet, through it all, she was conscious of an intense anxiety to know whether Leonard's hopes were to be fulfilled or not. She hated herself for think-

ing of the property at such a time, but she could not forget it; and, though she scarcely thought it possible that a disappointment could be in store for him, she longed for certainty. She felt that his heart was set upon being now the acknowledged heir of Throstlethwaite, and that if it were not to be, he would feel it acutely.

Mr. Charteris did not return home until after the dressing-bell had rung, and no one saw him until he came into the drawing-room, where they were all assembled before dinner. Ruth could not have spoken at that moment, even had it been necessary; but it was not, for Mrs. Charteris asked at once how he had found Mrs. L'Estrange.

"She is not ill," her husband replied, "and that is about all that can be said. She does not let herself be crushed by grief, but she looks as if she had lived some years of her life in this last week. She wants you to go to her to-morrow, Ruth, for a few days, if you will, and I answered for you that you would, and that we would send you over."

"It is what I have been wishing," Ruth said, but the words were not very audible.

"It seems so odd of her to send Leonard back to the bank now," said Mrs. Charteris. "One would have thought that she must want him at home."

It was as broad a hint as she thought it prudent to give.

"I don't know that he could do her much good now," replied Mr. Charteris. "And, anyhow, he ought to return to his work. Indeed, he *must*, if he is to keep his post."

"But his keeping it now must be a mere farce!" exclaimed Agatha. "It seems so absurd!"

"Your imagination goes too fast, Agatha," was her father's answer. "Leonard Barrington has not the shadow of a claim to the L'Estrange estates, and I think

Mrs. L'Estrange is very wise in deciding not to pledge herself to anything at present. Let him show himself worthy of such a prize before he is assured of it."

"It seems very hard upon him, though, all things considered," said Mrs. Charteris.

"I do not see it," returned her husband. "Until the last few weeks he can never have had any hope of such a thing; and one would be sorry to think that he had been dwelling much upon the chance of gain to himself, while poor Frank was dying. But it is because he may probably have thought of it lately that Mrs. L'Estrange sent for me to talk it over to-day. She thought it right that there should be no misunderstanding possible. Her decision is, I think, a wise one. Leonard is well enough, as young men go, and I have always liked him, and shall be sorry if he is much disappointed; but his career so far has not been exactly what one would consider a justification for singling him out from the rest of the world to make him the heir to such a property as that. The ins and outs of the matter are private affairs, and concern no outsiders; but this much I am authorized to say,—Mrs. L'Estrange both wishes and intends to make Leonard her heir, but it must depend upon his fulfillment of certain conditions. She means to speak to him about it this evening. She exacts nothing unreasonable. Leonard may easily satisfy her in two or three years, if he has the right stuff in him and chooses to exert himself; and if he does, he will have earned some thousands a year with uncommonly little trouble. Now, that is all I can tell you; and the less said about it the better, for it is certainly no business of ours."

Dinner was announced at this moment, and nothing further was said on the subject.

Mr. Charteris had spoken in all simplicity and good

faith, for he had not the slightest suspicion that Ruth was in any way concerned in the matter. Mrs. L'Estrange had frankly discussed her plans with him, but she had carefully abstained from all mention of Ruth, as soon as she saw that, whatever his wife's speculations might have been, *he* had no idea of the attachment between her and Leonard which was so generally believed in, and could consider the question before him with perfect impartiality.

He heartily approved of what she proposed to do ; and the knowledge that he did so helped her to nerve herself to the task of speaking to Leonard that evening. The explanation must be painful, and the more clearly she saw, in spite of all his efforts to conceal it, how feverishly anxious Leonard himself was, the more she dreaded it. She waited purposely until late in the evening, for she felt that it would probably be better that she should not see him again after she had spoken, until he returned from Edenford at the end of the week.

Leonard *was* desperately anxious. He was certain that Mr. Charteris's visit that afternoon was for the purpose of talking over business arrangements, and there was something in his aunt's manner during the evening which impressed him with a misgiving. He began to feel that his hopes were not to be realized ; and, if they were not——

It was a possibility which he could not bear to contemplate, for it seemed to him to involve the shattering of every prospect of happiness and prosperity.

The evening appeared interminably long, but it came to an end at last. Ten o'clock struck, the household came in and Mrs. L'Estrange read prayers, and then, once more, they were alone together. After a few moments' silence, Leonard, who had thrown himself into an arm-chair and taken up a newspaper, merely because he

knew that it concealed his face better than a book, felt every pulse suddenly throb as his aunt simply spoke his name.

“Leonard!”

It was a chilly evening in May, and Mrs. L'Estrange was sitting in a low chair by the fire. Leonard rose, put down his paper, and came and stood near her, waiting for her to speak, which she did immediately and quite calmly, though every tone of her voice betrayed the effort it cost her.

“I have some things to say to you, Leonard, which I think are better said without delay. I suppose you know that, now, this property is all absolutely in my own power. I have no heir, and I am free to choose to whom I will leave it.”

“Yes. I suppose so,” said Leonard, feeling that he must say something. “But there can be no hurry, surely. Why should you——”

“Because I think there is a possibility of my intentions being misunderstood, and I wish them to be quite clear. Of course you know that I have no relations with any claim upon this property, and, having yourself been so completely adopted by us since your childhood, it has most likely occurred to you that, almost as a natural consequence, I should now give you the position of a son. No, do not interrupt me, I do not blame you for thinking it; it is quite natural that you should, and for very many reasons it is what I should wish to do. There being no one with any real claim upon me, you, who have been brought up by your uncle and myself like a child of our own, seem naturally marked out to fill our boy's place. For the sake of your uncle's memory, for Frank's sake, to whom you have always been like a brother, and for your own, I wish that I could think it right to say to

you, simply, 'Be in all respects as my son;' but I cannot."

She paused, but Leonard said nothing. What could he have said, indeed? He stood there looking very white, but waiting silently for what might come next.

"I have thought the question over seriously, and feel more and more strongly that I should not be justified in deciding, now, to place you in such a position of power and responsibility. It would be a deliberate *choice* on my part, and I should feel myself to blame if in the future you had misused a power I had recklessly given. Think of your years of grown-up life, and ask yourself whether they have been so spent as to give me confidence in you. Have you not persistently cast off all the cares and responsibilities which you might have been expected to share, and frittered away your time and talents in the constant pursuit of pleasure, studying only how to get through your life with as little work and as much amusement as possible,—in fact, with no other object before you but self-gratification?"

"I know I have often been idle, Aunt Margaret," said Leonard; "but there is so little to interest one in the routine work of a house of business. And surely you see no harm in my enjoying such amusements as come in my way?"

"None whatever," replied Mrs. L'Estrange. "I know no harm of you, Leonard, and I hope there is none to know; but even the most innocent pleasure ceases to be blameless when it is made the object of life. Your tastes are naturally refined, and the amusements you seek are, I willingly believe, harmless enough in themselves; but I do think that you ought long ago to have shown yourself capable of taking a higher and more rational view of life, and have ceased to let yourself drift aimlessly along, con-

tent if only you could secure yourself an immunity from every disagreeable effort. Put yourself for one moment in my position, and answer a serious question candidly. It has fallen upon me to have to choose to whom I will give wealth and power,—upon whom all the responsibilities attaching to the possession of both shall be laid ; and can you give me one single reason, beyond the fact that I have already given you so many opportunities only to see them wasted, why my choice should fall upon *you* ? Have I good grounds for believing that the work done so well by my father and husband, and which I have tried to continue, would be carried on by you in the same spirit ?”

“I cannot defend the past,” said Leonard, with a flush of extreme mortification. “But if——” He stopped, for he scarcely knew how to frame the rest of his sentence.

Mrs. L'Estrange continued, without heeding him :

“I must speak first of the past. I want to recall with you the last five years,—those since your uncle's death left you practically to my charge. Understand clearly that I do not blame you in the very least for not becoming a clergyman : there you were quite right. I do not blame you *much* for having spent, as you certainly did, far too much while you were at Oxford, for you were a boy then, and thoughtless ; but when those debts, harmless enough, I admit, were all paid for you, I think the warning should have sufficed, and that you were then of an age to have felt that you were entering life with perhaps more burdens than some of your companions, but with many advantages. Your father's early death, leaving your mother with very small means and six children, might have obliged you to begin life very differently, had not your uncle educated you as if you had been his son. He left you five thousand pounds. It does not come to you while I live, but I have always given you the interest

of it as an allowance, and I did my best, time after time, to find work for you that was suited to you. I hoped after each failure to see you at last face the realities of life bravely, and make your own way in the world, accepting the duty, as you yourself advanced, of trying more and more to help your mother and sisters in their poverty. I need not dwell upon the true story of these years with each succeeding disappointment in you: you know as well as I do what you might have been, you know what you are. Idle, self-indulgent, and superficial, content just to keep your head above water, with no thought for others, and with apparently no sense of a higher purpose of existence than selfish amusement. Knowing all this, seeing how little fruitful were the talents already committed to your keeping, I should scarcely have thought myself justified in trusting you with more; and yet I think I should have done it, Leonard, because I have something of a mother's love for you, and because you were so dear to those whose loss we both mourn. I should have done it, trying to hope once more that I might be able to inspire you not only with the *wish* but the *will* to exert yourself, and to become what no one can doubt your power to be if you choose,—a good and useful man. But less than a week ago I received that letter. Read it, and then we will speak of it."

Leonard took the letter from her hands with a dread of what its contents might be. The postmark was "Hamburg;" the handwriting was that of Mrs. Ross, the wife of his former employer there.

He breathed more freely. It was impossible that the Rosses could know anything of what he most dreaded coming to his aunt's knowledge; this letter could not be to tell her of *that*, and he felt as if nothing else could signify in the least. When, however, he had read it, he

saw that coming at this moment its influence against him must be great.

Mrs. Ross wrote to Mrs. L'Estrange to say that she could not help appealing to her on behalf of the widow and children of one of her husband's clerks who had recently died. They were left, by accidental losses before his death, in great poverty, and had applied in vain to Mr. Barrington for the payment of a sum of nearly five hundred pounds, which he had borrowed at different times from his friend. Mr. Barrington wrote courteously and kindly; but, though he said he hoped to be able to pay it before very long, he was obliged to confess that it was utterly out of his power to do so at present. Mrs. Ross, evidently only half believing this, wrote to Mrs. L'Estrange to ask if it could not be arranged in some way. She knew that Leonard would have money eventually, and she therefore hoped that some plan might be devised for the immediate discharge of this debt.

Leonard, in his heart, cursed Mrs. Ross for a little meddling fool; but he felt how much was at stake, and he forced himself to say, as he returned the letter to his aunt,—

“I have been awfully sorry for it ever since they wrote to me, Aunt Margaret. But I really had not the money, nor the means of getting it. I would have sent *some* if I could; but I had run myself very short, and I did not like to worry you when——”

“But why was the money ever borrowed?” asked Mrs. L'Estrange.

“Of course I ought not to have wanted it,—I know that,—but expenses meet one at every turn, and——”

“And you have never taught yourself to resist temptation. I do not wish to inquire how you spent the money,—it matters very little; it is the weakness and folly proved

by your needing it, and the reckless selfishness shown in not even attempting to pay it, which confirm me in my decision about you. A man who, knowing that he owed this money to people not too well able to afford to lend it, could yet spend as you have spent at Edenford, is not the man to whom I would voluntarily give a large property. Your income may be small, but it has not been less than four hundred a year, and that is more than enough for the *necessaries* of comfortable life for you. Such superfluities as a horse, subscriptions to balls, and many more, were culpably thoughtless indulgences. I blame you, Leonard, and I tell you so frankly; but still I will hope. A fresh start opens to you now. You have only to think for yourself to know what is right, and I shall hope that then you will have self-control enough to do it. I received this letter from Mrs. Ross on Tuesday. I sent her a check for the sum immediately, and therefore you are freed from that claim; but the money must be repaid by you. Your salary is two hundred, your allowance from me is as much more, and you shall have the option of some extra work, so that you can make more if you choose. With hard work and careful self-denial, you might pay it in two years. You may do it with ease in three. For that time I shall keep this question open. Pay this debt, and incur no more, work and think, show that you can treat life earnestly and wisely, come to me free from all entanglements, ready to find pleasure in the duties as well as in the amusements of the position you desire, and it shall be yours."

While she spoke, Leonard had laid his arms on the chimney-piece and rested his head upon them, so that she could not see his face. All his better instincts and feelings were touched, and he was loathing himself as his conscience admitted the truth of her description of his wasted life.

He longed for courage to confess what she did not know, to pour out everything, and let her, knowing it, recall her last promise if she chose. But his aunt's manner, though kind and gentle, was not encouraging to confidence. She did not intend to be cold; but the effort she had to make to enter upon the subject at all, made her dread any display of feeling, either on her own side or on Leonard's. She was kind, but she dared not show even the tenderness she really felt for him, lest she should break down altogether. She forced herself to shrink from no duty, and therefore she had spoken; but emotion was to her so physically exhausting that she avoided it, if possible, by the strongest effort of will. She had spoken low and quietly, in a sort of constrained monotone, which gave the effect of coldness.

She appeared to Leonard to be passing judgment upon him, from a height of wisdom and goodness beyond the region of sympathy with weakness and failure; and, though he fully recognized how kind and lenient her decision was, she had failed to make him really understand her. He heard the calm, just censure, and then the generous offer of a chance of retrieving the past; but he could not read her heart.

Had she been less resolutely self-controlled,—had she been able to let him see how, in her loneliness and sorrow, she clung to the hope that he, with whom she had so many memories in common, might yet repay all that had been done for him by becoming really something of a son to her,—it might have given the one touch needed to win his full confidence. As it was, his courage failed.

When he raised his head and looked at her, the expression of the pale, worn face was almost stern in its fixed repose as she waited for him to speak. The impulse to confess what he knew must increase her contempt and

displeasure died away. He could not risk it, he dared not face the consequences, and hastily he spoke :

"I have nothing to say in my own defense, Aunt Margaret. It is all true, I know. You will not believe much in promises for the future ; but indeed I will try to prove to you that I am not altogether unworthy to——"

Mrs. L'Estrange left her seat and stood by him. She fancied that she understood the cause of the look of anxiety and embarrassment which even overpowered the sense of relief which she knew that her final decision must have given him. She laid her hand on his arm.

"Then so we leave it, Leonard. Your fate is in your own hands, and I think you have a motive, even stronger than a desire either to win wealth and position or to please me, for doing your utmost."

Leonard turned quickly.

"I know what you mean ; but what can I do ? Three years hence, the one happiness I prize beyond all others will probably have passed out of my reach."

"Let us understand each other fully," replied his aunt. "You love Ruth Charteris, and nothing would give me truer pleasure than to see her your wife, and as much a daughter to me as any one ever could be, *if* you prove yourself worthy of her. You have all that can make life bright within your reach, and it depends upon yourself whether you grasp it or not. For the present you can certainly do nothing. Mr. Charteris knows fully what I have said to you this evening,—it was right that he should do so,—but you need have no fear that any details will be known through him. He will say only what I wish to be known,—that nothing is to be settled as yet ; but, in the face of his knowledge of your position, it would of course be useless for you to ask, now, for his consent to an engagement with Ruth. I do not think that the idea of

your wishing it has ever occurred to him ; but I did not allude to it in talking to him, and therefore I know nothing. My own opinion is that to seek her openly now would be useless, while to seek her secretly would be, for every reason, wrong. You must wait and hope in silent patience. If, as I believe,—and as I am sure you believe yourself,—she has not only seen your affection for her, but returns it, surely you may trust her not to ‘pass out of your reach.’ She will know enough of the circumstances to interpret your conduct rightly, and she is truth and loyalty itself. It is for you to prove that her affection and faith are not misplaced.”

An eager, vehement protest was Leonard’s natural reply to the suggested doubt ; and then, speaking on the impulse of the moment, he proposed to his aunt that, instead of giving him his allowance henceforward, she should keep it back, and thus insure his payment of the debt.

“No, Leonard. The last thing I wish is to do this for you. The task before you is to prove yourself capable of persistent, conscientious, patient self-denial, to show that you can think justly and act rightly, that you have the sense and courage and self-control without which no man can hope to do good work in the world. You know what you have to do, and you must do it for yourself, though such help as I can give you by advice and sympathy shall not fail you if you voluntarily seek it. I shall not see you in the morning, for you go early ; but I shall expect you on Saturday again. This will be, as it has always been, your home, and you may come to it with the certainty that there are many things in which you may help me greatly if you care to do it, and that if you give me your confidence I will do my best to help you.”

A very few words more passed between them, of em-

barrasted gratitude and earnest promises on Leonard's side, and of grave kindness on hers, and the explanation so much dreaded was over.



CHAPTER X.

LEONARD impatiently paced the little platform of the Otter's Bridge station while he waited the next morning for the train by which he was to return to his work at Edenford. It was a bright, fresh morning, and he walked quickly, occupied apparently with thoughts which quite absorbed him but were by no means depressing.

He had been keenly disappointed at first by his aunt's decision about her property, and deeply and genuinely humiliated by her sketch of himself, the truth of which he could not but acknowledge. The first hours after she left him the previous evening were far from pleasant. He was almost overpowered by the difficulties before him, and he could not shake off the contempt which he felt for his own moral cowardice. But he was constitutionally elastic, and very soon the brighter side of things presented itself to his mind.

Three years was not so very long a time, after all, and, though it would be hard work to fulfill the conditions imposed upon him in that time, Ruth and Throstlethwaite were prizes well worth any effort to win. Apart from this view of the matter, he was quite capable of admitting, theoretically, that a life spent in real earnest work, in the pursuit of some good and worthy purpose, would be infinitely happier than the sort of life which he had hitherto led.

had never been able to resist the temptation to seek ease and to sacrifice duty to it, but he knew by experience that this "did not really pay;" and he resolved forward to throw himself seriously into graver life, devote his talents and energy to wise and noble occupations, reserving pleasure and amusement for relaxation from such weightier cares.

It was far from an unpleasant dream; but before it could be realized there was much to be done. He must free himself from debt, and so win the position in the world which must be his starting-point. It would not do. The money which Mrs. L'Estrange had advanced for him was by no means all that he owed. He had been careless in expenditure, especially of late, and when he had calculated everything, he found that the debt against him was considerably over eight hundred pounds. To pay this in two, or even three, years, out of an income of four hundred pounds was a difficult business, but it was one which must be solved somehow. He must spend as little as was possible, and he must try harder more.

At a moment he thought of telling his aunt the real state of his affairs, and trusting to her justice and generosity; but it was a step for which he had not courage. Frank he could not be, for there was one fact mixed up with some of these debts which he hated to recall, and which he could never endure that any one should know, not even all either Mrs. L'Estrange or Ruth. A garbled confession would be worse than none; and therefore, in the end, he must face the whole sum, though it seemed almost impossible to win, and must shrink from no labor to gain it. In his present mood, the recollection of all his faults and follies was hateful to him, and he made the most of his present good resolutions, determined that the past

should be blotted out as if it had never been, and that he would let himself think only of the future, which should be absolutely free from reproach. As to the practical difficulties, he was sure that he could conquer them if he chose; he had a strong belief in his own powers, and was confident of succeeding in anything if he really set himself to do it.

He got up the next morning full of plans and eager to begin his new life of work and self-denial. The first thing he did was to take a third-class ticket to Edenford, much to the amazement of the station-master. He thought, and truly, that every shilling was of consequence; and the fact of having thus made a beginning inspired him with fresh energy in planning both economies and work while he waited for the train. He would sell his horse; he would take cheaper rooms, and live as simply as was possible. But he must make money as well as save it; and that might be less easy. He would try writing for magazines and newspapers. He had no doubt that he could do it as well or better than half the people who did it and "made lots of money," and he was considering what style of writing would best suit his untried powers when his train came up.

He took a seat near the window on the side next the lake, for the line between Otter's Bridge and Carlsgill ran along the shore of Brideswater, close under the hills which separated it from Lingdale.

Leonard looked across to the Throstlethwaite woods, and felt that it was a home well worth working for; he thought, too, with some compassionate tenderness of his aunt's heavy trials and lonely life, and resolved to do henceforward all that he could do to help and cheer her. Then, as the train rushed on towards the upper end of the lake, it came opposite to Monksholme.

The little church of St. Bride's, standing there peaceful and solitary, as it had stood for centuries, in the meadows by the lake and under the shadow of the craggy mountain rising boldly behind it, could not fail to suggest a thought of the bright boy who had so recently been laid there; while the next instant the sight of Monksholme itself made it impossible to think of anything but Ruth. Leonard looked across at the house, cosily nestled in the angle between two hills, with large fields, broken here and there by soft masses of wood, sloping down to the lake, and with a background of mountain-side, partly rough and rocky, partly covered with larch plantations now in all the brilliant feathery green of spring.

He wondered what Ruth was doing,—how much she knew of his present position,—what she thought and felt about it. An irresistible longing to see her and to tell her his own story came over him; he felt that at all costs he must secure her sympathy for himself; he *must* be the first to tell her how it was; he must seek her counsel and some assurance of her faith in him.

Always quick to plan and then to execute, Leonard yielded to the impulse; when the train stopped at Carls-gill he jumped out, and in another minute it had gone on its way towards Thornbeck, leaving him there. He looked at his watch. It was half-past nine. The next train did not pass till twelve, so he had plenty of time. There were boats for hire at the lake-side near Carls-gill; he would take one, row across to Monksholme, see Ruth, and return in time to go on to Edenford by the next train. He was pretty sure that he had a very good chance of finding her alone, and he congratulated himself on having thought of it.

His luggage had gone on: he telegraphed to the station-master at Edenford to look after it, and keep it till he

came. He should not reach Edenford till two, instead of before eleven, for the mid-day train involved a long wait at the junction with the main line ; but he knew that under the circumstances no questions would be asked, and he telegraphed to Mr. Nichols that he was unavoidably detained and was coming by the later train. He arranged about his ticket, and then he walked down to the lake and hired the lightest boat that was to be had, for two or three hours.

By the time he had rowed out into the lake it did occur to him that sending needless telegrams and hiring boats to go on needless errands was not carrying out his plans of strict economy very rigidly ; while coolly taking some hours of the day for his own purposes was scarcely conscientious devotion to business ; but he told himself that it was really necessary that he should see Ruth. She had a *right* to hear the truth from himself ; she would give him valuable hints as to both saving and making money ; she would tell him how he could economize ; she would suggest something helpful as to his writing ; in short, this expedition was one of absolute duty and necessity. It was, at any rate, very pleasant.

Leonard rowed, not to the regular Monksholme landing-place, but to an old, disused boat-house, about half a mile higher up the lake, more directly opposite Carlsgill, and therefore nearer to it as well as more out of the way of observation. He then walked quickly up the fields at some distance from the house, and came out upon the high-road at the Monksholme Lodge, which stood at the foot of the gorge between the two mountains, Bridesmoor and Friar's Fell. Crossing the road, he went through a gate which led upon the grassy, rocky lower slopes of Friar's Fell, and followed a path which took him up the gorge.

It was here that he expected to find Ruth. He remembered hearing her tell Frank on that last evening at

Throstlethwaite that she was going to make a sketch from Friar's Fell, and send it with some other things to the Miss Merediths, for their stall at a bazaar at Edenford for the county infirmary. He knew that a sketch from this place must be made by the morning light; he knew that during the past week only one or two mornings had been fine enough for sketching, so that the drawing was not likely to be finished yet; it must be sent off in ten days more, and Ruth was going to Throstlethwaite that afternoon for the week; therefore he concluded that, this being a fine morning, she was certain to be at work, and was nearly certain to be alone.

He soon saw that he had reasoned correctly. Ruth was sitting there drawing, and was quite alone, except for the guardianship of a large, handsome brown retriever, which lay at her feet keeping solemn watch over her parasol. It was Ruth's usual ruse for keeping Hector still when she was drawing; and he would lie quietly for hours until guard was relieved. Quiz, her other pet, a vivacious terrier, was left at home, for his devotion to rabbit-hunting made it impossible to bring him upon the hill unless she was prepared to do nothing but keep him out of mischief.

She did not hear Leonard coming up the hill, for the beck, which dashed rather turbulently down the gorge, made a good deal of noise, and her first intimation of his presence was from Hector, whose short bark announced that he saw an acquaintance, while the heavy measured flop of his tail on the ground seemed intended to offer his courteous apologies for not rising to welcome him, from doing which his important duty of watching his mistress's property must excuse him.

Leonard had not forgotten that evening on the lake, and he had no intention of risking another quarrel, or of placing Ruth in the difficulty of either refusing to engage

herself to him, or doing so contrary to her sense of right. He intended to ask nothing. He would tell her all that had passed between him and his aunt, and even give her some idea of his further difficulties; he would confide in her and consult her, tacitly assuming that her interest in it all was that of his future wife; and he knew that she would be left feeling herself pledged to him, and yet with nothing that she could insist upon telling.

She had been thinking of him, longing to know how he had borne the knowledge of Mrs. L'Estrange's determination. She looked up and saw him standing near her, apparently in the brightest spirits.

"I can't shake hands," she said, with a quick blush and smile. "I should upset everything. But how *do* you happen to be here at this time in the morning?"

"I was in the train on my way to Edenford," he replied, throwing himself on the ground near her, "and, looking across at this bit of Friar's Fell, some unseen and benevolent spirit, or some mesmeric influence, conveyed to me the certainty that you were here. I obeyed the inspiration, got out at Carlsgill, took a boat, and here I am, with nearly an hour to spare before I need go back to catch the twelve-o'clock train. Seriously, Ruth, I knew you were likely to be up here drawing, and I felt that I must see you. No, you needn't try to look as if I were playing truant and ought to be scolded. I am here because I want to talk to you in solemn, serious earnest about all this; and you must listen, and then help me to consider what I am to do. You always have done it, you know, and you won't stop now when I want help so badly? You *couldn't* do it, I know!"

Ruth smiled.

"How am I to know what 'all this,' as you call it, means?"

"I am come on purpose to tell you. It isn't exactly pleasant to do; but you have a *right* to know it all, and I *want* you to know. How much did Mr. Charteris tell you of what Aunt Margaret means to do about the property?"

"Only that she would not fix anything at present; but that, if you fulfilled certain conditions, she hoped in two or three years to settle about it in your favor, and that she meant to speak to you last night."

"Which she did; and what she said you shall know, even if it costs me all I value most in the world."

With which preface Leonard proceeded to repeat, faithfully enough, the substance of the conversation between himself and Mrs. L'Estrange the previous evening.

"Now, Ruth, you know it all," he concluded. "I shall not try to defend myself. But, you see, even Aunt Margaret does not despair of me; she gives me a chance once more, and so will you, will you not? You won't throw me over just when I most want all the help which you and no one else can give me. One thing I may say for myself, Ruth. I got into all this mess *before I came back to Edenford*. I have seen everything quite differently since last summer; but it was very hard to put myself straight. I could not help seeing what everybody thought about the property, and I fancied everything would be easy at once. I deceived myself, you see, and I suppose you will give the verdict—'served you right!'"

Ruth looked at him half reproachfully.

"Of course I can't help seeing that Mrs. L'Estrange is right about it," she said; "but why should you think that I shall have hard thoughts of you? You know it is not so. I think she is right to impose this test; but that does not make me doubt you, or believe it to be really needed. I am sure you will do all that she requires of

you, and I think you will do it in the shortest possible time, too."

Leonard raised himself energetically.

"Ruth, it is life and inspiration to hear you say that, and to know that you have faith in me. But though I do intend from to-day to turn over a new leaf altogether, and do all I possibly can, there is more bother ahead than Aunt Margaret thinks, and that is what I want to talk to you about. If it were only the money she has paid, I could manage it well enough; but, unluckily, I've let myself in for nearly as much more, one way and another; and if I'm to be clear of debt before she settles this business, I must scrape up a good bit over eight hundred pounds somehow. And how can I do it the quickest?"

"Oh, Leonard!" exclaimed Ruth, in dismay. "Why didn't you tell her about it? I am sure she would have let you off half, because, though she has a very high standard about such things, she is always kind and reasonable; and, as I feel sure she *wishes* you to succeed, she would not like the trial to be too hard for you."

"I didn't want to worry her more," replied Leonard! "and, besides, Ruth, I am going in for a high standard now, and I *ought* to do it all. I don't want her to know about it until I have done it. It's absurd, too, to suppose that, having two hundred a year from her to live upon, I can't *somehow* make a few hundred pounds in much less than three years, if I really give myself up to it! And certainly, as Aunt Margaret herself said, I have the strongest possible motive for making every effort."

Ruth was silent. Her color came and went quickly, as she bent over her drawing and stirred up little whirlpools in the tin of water belonging to her sketching-apparatus.

"The sooner it is all right the better pleased she will

be," added Leonard. "She wants you nearly as much as I do, Ruth, and three years *is* an awfully long time to look forward."

Ruth looked up quickly.

"But if it had not been for Frank's death, Leonard, it would have been much more than three years that we should have had to wait, and therefore you ought not to mind even if it does take you all that time."

"It shan't take it, though!" was Leonard's prompt reply, and he plunged into the subject of his views as to literature. He had all the ready cleverness and superficial cultivation which were needed for sketching out a plan for work of this kind and describing it brilliantly, especially with the pleasant encouragement of Ruth's quick sympathy and interest. She listened to him with such ready comprehension and such suggestive comments that he grew more eager and more hopeful, and when at last he rose to leave her, having given himself only just time to catch his train, he said,—

"I shall make a beginning at once, and work hard; and, as I am coming home again on Saturday, I shall manage to show it to you, somehow, and see what you think. You always set one's ideas going, Ruth, and give them an edge! I'll work all that out; and so, *between us*, don't you think, though you accuse me of being too sanguine, that we may look to getting to the top of the hill pretty soon?"

Ruth was at the moment under the influence of his bright self-confidence, and was touched by his trust in her, and his open dependence on her sympathy.

"I hope so," she answered, with a smile. "And, at any rate, we can enjoy working together, to make the time as short as possible."

Leonard looked at his watch again, hastily said good-

by, and ran off down the hill, thoroughly content with his morning's work.

Ruth watched him until he was out of sight, and then turned again to her drawing ; but all power of work was gone for that morning. Freed from the spell of Leonard's presence, she became suddenly conscious that, though he had asked and she had given no promise, they had been talking of their common future as if it were a matter of course. He had not once put her on her guard by talking of love, but he had assumed that he was confiding in her as she would naturally do in his future wife, and she had admitted the assumption. She knew that she had tacitly pledged herself to keep the meeting secret, and that his revelations of his private affairs were made to her alone, trusting implicitly in her faith. She perceived that, without intending it, she had drifted into an understanding that was in every way equivalent to a secret engagement ; but she felt that she could not now draw back, even if she wished it, and most certainly she did not wish it, for Leonard had a hard task before him, and would need all the help and encouragement she could give before they could expect to find themselves "at the top of the hill."

CHAPTER XI.

THE evenings were growing long, for it was the middle of May ; and when, on the first day of her stay at Throstlethwaite, Ruth returned to the drawing-room after dinner with Mrs. L'Estrange, the windows were still unclosed. Such light as there was in the room came chiefly from the fire, but there was a lingering sunset glow in the sky and on one or two of the highest hills, although

the lake and valley and all the lower slopes were already in deep shadow. Ruth went to the window to watch each rapidly succeeding tint melt gently away until all was cold and colorless in the twilight, and even stood there after the outlines of the trees and hills grew faint and indistinct in the increasing darkness. It was so grave and still that it seemed 'as if with the light all life had faded too, and it harmonized with her present mood, for it appeared to her as if both life and light were truly gone from the lot of the friend she loved so well.

Ruth had known nothing yet of deep personal sorrow, for her life had been very bright and happy, but she had the quick perception and sympathy of a nature at once loving and sensitive.

Mrs. L'Estrange was essentially self-controlled and undemonstrative; she would not allow grief to conquer her energies, and she followed her accustomed routine of life with perfect outward calmness; but no one, knowing and loving her, could look at her without seeing how intensely she had suffered. Ruth remembered old Daniel's homely words, "T' missis has a brave spirit, but it'll just be half hersel' she'll bury when she buries him," and she felt that they were true. Duty was left,—she might possibly even find happiness in fulfilling it,—and there might also be much alleviation of sorrow in the affection and sympathy of the friends who remained to her; but Ruth knew that with Frank's death all the joy and brightness were gone from her life. Leonard might, however, do much to cheer her if he would,—and that he would Ruth firmly believed; while she felt that in another way she herself could do even more.

Mrs. L'Estrange was more unreserved with Ruth than with any one else, and it was a comfort to her to have a companion whose sympathy and comprehension were as

perfect as they were unobtrusive. She had long felt towards Ruth as if she were almost a daughter, and that tie was now drawn closer; for Frank had loved her dearly, and his mother was sure that if he had known himself to be dying he would have liked to think that in the future she would be at Throstlethwaite as Leonard's wife. Something with regard to that future Mrs. L'Estrange now wished to say. She desired to make Ruth understand what she had done, and why. So much she thought was due both to her and Leonard, though of course nothing could be said plainly, for her views were rather more romantic than those of most people in the present day, and the ordinary gossiping discussion of love-affairs was to her distasteful in the extreme. She did not wish to open the subject with Mr. or Mrs. Charteris, for it seemed to her better that no attempt should be made by any one either to make or mar in the matter, and that with the gradual growth of heart and mind in each, as time went on, they should either drift together or apart as their own feelings prompted them, unfettered by family observation and criticism.

That they loved each other *now* she did not doubt, but she thought it infinitely better that they should have more time to judge each other, and that therefore enforced uncertainty and silence were desirable as well as necessary. She had far too much respect for Ruth to think for a moment of trying to draw from her any confidence on the subject; but she wished to do for Leonard what he could, she thought, scarcely do at present for himself,—make Ruth aware of all the difficulties in his way, which must impose silence upon him for a long while to come. As she had laid the conditions upon him, she ought in justice to let them be known to Ruth, and so make misconception of his motives impossible.

"I have written to Emily, to-day," was Mrs. L'Estrange's beginning, as Ruth left the window and came to the fire, seating herself comfortably on the rug.

"Emily" was Mrs. Charles Barrington, Leonard's mother, and Ruth at once guessed what was coming, and heartily wished it over. Mrs. Charles Barrington had lived at Kilhowe, in Lingdale, ever since her husband's death, which had taken place when Leonard was only seven years old. She had five girls, all younger than this one boy, and she was very poor, so that she had been glad to have this cottage belonging to her sister-in-law rent free, and to live within reach of constant help and kindness. Two of the girls were already married, and the remaining three were gone to San Remo for the winter with their mother, for the health of the youngest, the necessary funds being provided by Mrs. L'Estrange.

They were to spend June in Switzerland before returning home, and thus it happened that during all the time of Frank's illness none of them had been in the country.

"I thought I ought to write to her," continued Mrs. L'Estrange. "She is not the sort of person one can ever consult, of course, but she has a right to know what I have decided about Leonard, and to a certain extent my reasons for it. I am afraid it will be a great disappointment to her, though I did my best to word it pleasantly. I suppose your father told you about it, so that you know what I mean?"

"Papa said very little; only that you wished to leave everything undecided for a time, so as to see if——" There she paused, unable to frame the rest of the sentence to her satisfaction.

"And that is really all there is to tell, except some business details which need not be public property," replied Mrs. L'Estrange. "It seems so horribly soon to

have to think of these things, but I felt that I *must*. I could not help knowing that there would be much speculation as to what I should do with the property, and I felt sure that it would be generally expected that I should at once decide on leaving it to Leonard. It is what I wish to do, and what I hope I shall eventually feel justified in doing; but I cannot decide now. I must first have some reason for trusting him to accept the duties of such a position as well as the pleasures, and hitherto I have had only disappointments about him. Personally, he is dearer to me than any one now living, except yourself, dear child, and I am very sorry to disappoint him, for, of course, I know that it *is* a disappointment; but I have done what I believed to be right. I found quite lately that he was a good deal in debt, for which there was no shadow of excuse. The details I need not tell you. I have not told them even to his mother, for I consider it right to treat the whole affair as a confidence from him, though it was not one; but it is better for *you* to know how I have decided the main question. I have paid this money for him, and I have given him three years in which to repay it and to prove himself capable of steady work and self-denial. He *can* be all I want him to be if he chooses, and I am sure that he now means to try. If he can resist temptation and give himself up to the real work of life for that time, I shall then have no hesitation in openly adopting him as the heir to this property."

Ruth was silent. She had never felt so uncomfortable as the consciousness of having carefully to conceal how much she knew about it all made her feel now; but she had no right to betray Leonard's confidence in her, and therefore she listened in silent embarrassment, thankful that Mrs. L'Estrange should have chosen the twilight hour for this discussion.

"I dare say your sympathies go with Leonard in the matter," resumed Mrs. L'Estrange, quietly ; "but, though at first it may seem to you that I have been hard upon him, if you imagine yourself in my position I think you will understand what I felt about it."

Ruth looked up quickly.

"Indeed I don't think you hard!" she exclaimed. "I feel that you were quite right and very wise ; but I can't help being sorry that it was necessary, though I would not have had you do otherwise, and though I am sure it will all be right in the end. He will not disappoint you again," she added, confidently.

"I hope not," replied Mrs. L'Estrange, "and I mean to have faith in him, for I do not wish to be hard on boyish folly and weakness, and I know that many of the best and most useful men have been even more weak and more foolish than he has been, in their early lives. You have always been such intimate companions, that very likely he may himself tell you more about it some day ; but, in justice to him, as we are talking of him, I must tell you that he bore all I had to say uncommonly well last night, and I know it was a great shock. He had been dwelling upon this chance for some time, probably, and counting upon it as certain to enable him to seek the happiness he most desires ; and now all present hope of that sort must be over. He must work and wait, patiently and silently, for all these years, and it is a hard trial for him ; but he has the strongest possible motive for exertion, and no one will rejoice more than I shall to see him reap the full reward when the time comes. It will add more to *my* happiness than anything else ever can do now ; and I know it is what both my husband and my boy would have wished, could they have foreseen what was to happen."

Ruth understood, and knew that she was meant to

understand. She felt the delicate kindness which thus relieved her from all chance of misunderstanding and doubt, without attempting to seek from her either confession or pledge. She looked up gratefully and lovingly, with a deepening color, as she said,—

“Three years is not so very long, after all! And happiness worth having is surely worth waiting for even longer than that.”

It was enough. They understood each other perfectly, and the subject was never again alluded to between them during Ruth's visit, which lasted till the end of the week. They had many things to interest them, for Mrs. L'Estrange had now resolved upon making the church and school which she wished to build at Kester's Hill a memorial to Frank, and was occupying herself energetically about it. It was evident that both were greatly needed; and the result of an expedition which they made there one day was to confirm Mrs. L'Estrange in an idea which had before occurred to her.

“There is work enough there for a life-time, Ruth,” she said, as they were driving home. “The only question is how to begin.”

“It must be so long before either church or school can be available,” replied Ruth; “and now, with both three miles off, they might almost as well be without either. They want civilizing horribly.”

“I see only one thing to be done. My new agent must live there, and I must choose him accordingly. There is the old manor-house, which could easily be made sufficiently habitable, and of course I must give a higher salary; but a resident gentleman with some knowledge of how to manage them would do immense good.”

“Do you suppose the gentleman you have heard of will be likely to suit such a purpose?”

"Mr. Wodehouse, Leonard's friend? I have no means of knowing. I have desired Leonard to write and ask him to come down on Saturday for two or three days. Then we shall see. I think he may very likely not fancy taking charge of the manners of Kester's Hill. But, if he does not, I shall not hurry myself in choosing. I have leisure now to do a great deal of work for myself,—indeed, I *must* work if I am to live,—and it is good for Leonard to help me, as he can in many ways, so that until some one whom I believe to be really the right man appears I shall do without one."

"I think you are quite right about Kester's Hill," said Ruth; "but I can imagine it may prove rather a difficulty, for it is not an attractive place."

"Not at all. But to the right man the work to be done would be interesting enough to make up for the dreariness of the place, and if he were a gentleman he would have plenty of relief from it in the society of the country."

Ruth was interested in the welfare of Kester's Hill, but nevertheless she could not help hoping that the "right man" might not present himself immediately. She felt certain that the more Leonard was called upon to work for and with his aunt, the better was his chance of passing triumphantly through the time of trial. When they reached Throstlethwaite, Mrs. L'Estrange stopped after she got out of the carriage to speak to Daniel.

"How is Joe to-day, Daniel?"

"He's mendin', ma'am, so t' doctor says."

"Do you think he will be well enough to see me if I come down to the stables to-morrow?"

"Mebbes he might; but there's no countin' on him," replied the old man, rather constrainedly.

"Well, I will take my chance," replied his mistress.

"I will come down to-morrow afternoon."

"You've never been to have a look at t' horses yet, Miss Ruth," said Daniel, before Ruth could follow Mrs. L'Estrange into the house.

Ruth had not in fact yet had courage to go to the stables, which she had always been accustomed to saunter round with Frank; but she perceived now that Daniel wanted to speak to her, and she said, quietly,—

"No, I have not been yet; but I'll come down after tea, Daniel, and go round with you."

Half an hour later she fulfilled her promise, and found Daniel very busy with stable-work. Ever since the day of Frank's death, Joe had been seriously ill, and the undergroom had had more than enough to do. After a few remarks on the horses, Ruth said,—

"And how is Joe, really, do you think, Daniel?"

"He's not much to crack on, Miss Ruth," replied Daniel, pausing with his hand on the bolt of the loose box where Frank's favorite, "Bayard," was serenely enjoying his oats. "He's rather a weak sort, is Joe; and what's happened might have taken t' wind out of a wiser chap nor him for a bit. He's better, and t' doctor told him this mornin' he was well enough to be about if he'd only think it; but he's fairly feared to put his foot out o' t' door and see any o' t' house-folks; and if t' missis comes near him, it'll just set him daft. He can't give over thinkin' what he's brought on her; and if she comes speakin' friendly, with that look on her face as if her heart was just breakin'——"

The old man could get no further, and Ruth felt intense pity for both him and his son, fully realizing what they must feel.

"Poor Joe!" she said, gently. "I am very sorry for him. I can quite understand it all; but we must make him see that nobody—least of all Mrs. L'Estrange—

doubts his devotion to poor Frank. I dare say, however, it will be best to find him some place quite away from here as soon as he is well enough to go. Has he seen nobody yet but you and the doctor?"

"He won't see none o' them, not if it was ever so," answered Daniel. "Yon lad that's comè to bide here while t' priest's away,—*he's* been up two or three times; and Joe saw *him*."

Ruth gathered from the tone—half contemptuous, half defiant—that the visits of the young curate who was temporarily filling the place of the vicar (who had gone from home for a few weeks' holiday about ten days before Frank's death) had not been successful.

"It was kind of him to come," she said; "but it is difficult for a stranger to understand, perhaps——"

"He's a well-meanin' chap enough; but what's the good of a bit lad like him, that knows nothin' o' life and now it takes folks, comin' here and thinkin' to put Joe right with just talkin' as if it came out of a book? A priest should be an old fellow that has some notion o' trouble, Miss Ruth. Them lads frae t' south isn't worth fetchin' here. You mun just feel by rule, and not think for yoursel' at all, if you're to suit *their* ways."

Ruth could imagine that an inexperienced and very young man might easily have found himself unequal either to understanding how to deal wisely with poor Joe's morbid misery or to answering Daniel's independent views, sounding to southern ears, perhaps, both rough and irreverent.

"Do you think Joe would see *me*?" she asked. "I might be able to persuade him, perhaps, that no one thinks harshly of him because he was so overpowered by a sudden shock as to forget what he was doing."

"*You'll* bring him round fast enough, Miss Ruth, if

you'll be that kind as to sit a bit with him. You're only a bit lassie, and you can't know more o' trouble nor yon parson lad; but women's good at guessin' what folks is like to feel. They're rare hands both at hurtin' and healin'. There's none of us can match them at breakin' or mendin', accordin' as they take to good ways or bad."

The compliment might be a doubtful one, but Ruth accepted it as it was meant, and proposed to go and pay Joe a visit at once, without giving him a chance of refusing to see her. Daniel readily led the way across the yard to the cottage which he had inhabited for thirty years. His wife had died long ago, but he and Joe had continued to live there together, getting on wonderfully well without feminine help.

Ruth rather dreaded the task before her; but she had been brought up to know and sympathize with her poor friends and neighbors as well as with the rich, and she thought that very likely she might have some influence over Joe, and might bring him into a more healthy state of mind. She so far succeeded that he nerved himself to see his mistress the next day, because she said that he ought; but he very gratefully accepted the suggestion of leaving Throstlethwaite for a time, and as soon as he could travel he was sent off to Ireland to Edgar Charteris, who was instructed to keep him employed until he could find a place for him.

"It's a pity but you belonged to us, Miss Ruth," said old Daniel, as he drove her home to Monksholme in the pony-carriage on Saturday morning. "We'll miss you badly. You're a better parson to us all round nor *yon*," indicating the vicarage with his whip.

"Because you like an old friend to chat with you better than somebody who teaches you," said Ruth, smiling.

"You know, Daniel, you like to do all the preaching yourself!"

"Anyways, I'm like to be wiser nor *him*! There's not a body in t' parish sits patienter through t' sarmons in church. T' priest's bound to read one, whether he likes it or not, and it's only manners to sit and see him well through wi' it; but if he comes to see me in *my* house, let him behave hissel' like a gentleman, and not preach, nor pray neither, till I ask it on him,—and it'll be a long time first, when it's one o' them set-up south-country lads, that thinks they knows everything, and hasn't a word to say if you only ask them a question a bit out o' t' high-road."

Daniel's views on such points were apt to be peculiar, as Ruth well knew, and were often expressed in phrases more original than conventionally reverent; and she was rather inclined to pity the well-meaning strange youth who had so deeply irritated him. It made her think of the rough population at Kester's Hill, and hope that Mrs. L'Estrange would not try a "lad frae t' south" as an agent.

CHAPTER XII.

"THERE is your letter, Agatha," said Colonel Kennedy, one morning early in the following week, entering the drawing-room, where his wife happened at the moment to be alone.

"A pleasant, tempting plan, is it not?" said Agatha, as she took back the letter.

"More tempting than feasible," was her husband's reply. "It is quite out of the question."

The letter was from Sir Everard Kennedy to Agatha.

He had lately taken a house in London, and now wrote to ask if she and Nigel would not come up to him for a few weeks and then join him in a trip abroad. He was ordered to Homburg, for a course of the waters there, and thought of going on to the Engadine afterwards. He proposed that his nephew and niece should be his guests in London for five or six weeks from the beginning of June, and that afterwards they should all go abroad together. He was aware that the children might be a difficulty, but hoped that Agatha would be able to leave them for the summer with her mother.

Agatha liked the idea of the variety and amusement, and before she passed on the letter to her husband had fully made up her mind to go. She would not have left her children on any account, except in her mother's care, but they could stay at Monksholme perfectly well. She knew that Colonel Kennedy would not hear of her asking such a favor, and would decidedly assume that going was impossible; but she had arranged her plans in her own mind quite to her satisfaction, and had no doubt of carrying her point in the end.

"I was afraid you might think so," she said, quietly. "Not that papa and mamma would not be delighted to have the children for any length of time."

"I don't doubt that they would have them, if you asked it," replied Colonel Kennedy. "But I don't choose to ask any one to be plagued with all our children and their nurses for two or three months, while we are away amusing ourselves. You would not be satisfied, any more than I should, to leave them in lodgings with only the servants; and, indeed, if we did send them to the sea anywhere in that way, this foreign expedition would be more expensive than would be wise, when we don't know how many months may pass before I have another appointment."

"Of course it wouldn't do to be imprudent," said Agatha, who was always perfectly sensible and reasonable. "It would have been very pleasant; but if we can't manage it, there is no use in thinking about it."

"I must be in London for a week or two," said Colonel Kennedy. "There are several things which I must do,—going to a *Levéé* among them,—and it would be just as well, perhaps, for you to go to a Drawing-room; so I think we had better accept my uncle's invitation for a fortnight. I should not hesitate to ask your mother to let the children remain here for that time, and then we must look out for some place to go to for the summer."

"And don't you think we might take Ruth with us? Sir Everard would like nothing better; he delights in a young lady, you know, and I know there is a room she could have. It would be such a great thing to get her away from here, now, you see! I am sure mamma would be thankful; and the longer she stayed with us the better."

"The better for *us*, certainly," said Colonel Kennedy. "Whether she may wish to go is another question."

"Oh, mamma will settle that," answered Agatha. "It is all made so awkward by this wonderful crotchet of Mrs. L'Estrange's. Of course, now, there is no certainty as to what Leonard's position may be, and the only thing to do is to get him out of Ruth's head if possible."

Mrs. Charteris came in at this moment, and Agatha turned to her.

"We were talking about Ruth, mamma. Nigel says that we must go to London, to Sir Everard, for two or three weeks in June. But after that we shall of course settle ourselves somewhere for the summer, and I was saying that I wish you would let us take Ruth away for a good while, and try to put Leonard out of her head."

"I should be most thankful if you would, my dear," replied Mrs. Charteris. "There is nothing like change and amusement. Here she would see him constantly; and not many people besides, at this time of year."

"I am quite sure that my uncle will be delighted to receive Agatha's sister," said Colonel Kennedy; "and the longer you will spare her to us afterwards, wherever we may go, the better pleased we shall be, as long as she is happy with us."

"You are very kind, and if you would really not mind having her ——"

"Mind? Mamma!" cried Agatha. "It would be odd if we did! She is a charming companion for me, as good as a governess for Ethel, and quite a secretary to Nigel!"

"But I thought I heard you saying something to Ruth, at breakfast, of a plan for going abroad with Sir Everard?" said Mrs. Charteris.

"Oh," Agatha answered, "he asks us to go with him to Homburg first, and then to the Engadine; but we can't quite manage that. There are the children to consider, and expense, and all sorts of things; and we are wise and prudent domestic characters! Or else, if we *had* been going, and papa would have let Ruth go too, *that* would have been really a capital thing for her: would it not?"

Agatha's manner was as innocent and unconscious as possible; but Colonel Kennedy recognized with considerable annoyance that her ready acquiescence had meant, as usual, very little, and that she was now manœuvring most skillfully to secure having her own way.

"But, my dear, why cannot you go?" said Mrs. Charteris, before her son-in-law could speak. "Surely you could trust the children to me? Where could they be better than here? And if you leave them here it will not

cost you more to go abroad than it would do if you all went to the sea."

"No," replied Agatha; "but Nigel thought—*He* settles the plans, so you must ask him about it."

"Was it any scruple about leaving the children here, Nigel?" asked Mrs. Charteris, at once. "Because, if it was, there was never anything more absurd! They will be only a pleasure; and even if they *were* a charge, I should think nothing of it, if you will kindly take Ruth abroad with you. Nothing could be so invaluable a service to us, just at this moment. It would be the greatest relief, for all this is terribly awkward for her, and bad for her health and spirits. She has never been abroad at all, and would enjoy it extremely, of course; and I am quite sure that Mr. Charteris will consent at once to her going, if you will take her. It will be the greatest kindness."

Colonel Kennedy could give no possible reason for refusing to do what every one seemed to wish, and what was also pleasant to himself. He could only thank Mrs. Charteris for her hospitality to his children, and assure her that he should thoroughly enjoy taking charge of Ruth. He could also put aside any scruples as to their taking her with them to his uncle's, who he said always wished to give Agatha every possible pleasure, and liked nothing so well as having young people to take about with him.

Mrs. Charteris went away to speak to her husband about it at once, in order that Agatha might answer Sir Everard's letter by return of post, as she said she ought to do.

Colonel Kennedy was following her from the room, when Agatha called him back, and, coming up to him, said, with a mischievous smile,—

"Now, Nigel, thank me for managing that delicate business so successfully."

He could not help laughing at her, though he tried to say, reprovingly,—

“You know, Agatha, I always dislike to see you lower yourself by petty manœuvring, and when I told you that I did not wish to have any such favor asked, I meant it.”

Agatha raised her hands and eyes in burlesque despair.

“Was there ever such unreasonable ingratitude? I know you told me not to ask a favor, and a most unnecessary injunction it was, for it is a thing I never do by any chance! It is much the best policy to *confer* them; and generally it only depends on putting the same thing in a different way. We are going abroad with Sir Everard, because he will like it so much better if we do, that we *even* make up our minds to leave our children. We are going, also, because it will be so good for Ruth, and such a relief to mamma; and virtue, as we all know, is its own reward.”

“Nevertheless, Agatha, I like straight roads best,” replied her husband.

Agatha laughed.

“But there *wasn't* a straight road in this case, you see. You said I was not to ask, and, as I always do as I am bid, I didn't ask. Mamma offered it all, you must admit; and, after all, you know you like the plan much better than going to the sea, as we should otherwise have done.”

“I know you are incorrigible!” he answered, with a laugh. “And it is of no use to scold you. Seriously, though, what is the real question about Ruth?”

“That is just the point,” replied Agatha. “There isn't any question at all, or it would not be so troublesome a matter. One thing I have made up my mind about,—Ethel shall have no boy friends of that sort; but as to Ruth,—well, of course, no one can doubt that she and Leonard Barrington look upon themselves as engaged

to each other, and that is very provoking. Nobody can interfere, because nothing has ever been said about it. Mamma let it go on all last winter, because she hadn't a doubt that he would succeed to Throstlethwaite, and Mrs. L'Estrange is so fond of Ruth that then there would have been no difficulty at all. I don't blame Leonard; of course he expected it, and very reasonably, and it was only common prudence to wait to speak out till the time came. Ruth must have understood that, and certainly mamma did, but this crotchet of Mrs. L'Estrange's makes it all horribly awkward. It leaves Leonard absolutely at the mercy of her caprices, and if he does not contrive to satisfy her completely, for three whole years, she may very likely never give him the property at all. This being the case, it is out of the question to let anything go on between him and Ruth; and yet there is nothing to stop. It is all such nonsense, too. Leonard is very pleasant and gentlemanly, and quite as fit for the position as most eldest sons, and the only effect of Mrs. L'Estrange's setting up a high standard and insisting on his reaching it will probably be to teach him to deceive her. It is offering a premium on hypocrisy."

"She probably has good reasons, of which we know nothing," replied Colonel Kennedy, "for she is a sensible woman, and both just and generous. I am sorry for Ruth. Three years of waiting and doubt will be very trying to her."

"Oh, absurd!" Agatha rejoined. "To wait all that time, and then find nothing come of it, would not do at all. She could never marry Leonard without Throstlethwaite; and that is now such an uncertainty that we must do all we can to put the idea out of her head at once. If she moons on for three years about Leonard, and then Mrs. L'Estrange throws him over, perhaps without much

reason, she is just the sort of girl to think it all the more necessary to stick by him. Here she would see him constantly, and keep it up; but if we take her away and amuse her, there will be some chance of her forgetting him and giving it up entirely. She ought to marry well. Mamma says that Douglas Allonby admires her very much. We are sure to see plenty of him in London. That would really be a better match for her than Leonard, even with Throstlethwaite, and *Nethercroft* is safely entailed."

"Change and amusement will be good for Ruth, undoubtedly," replied Colonel Kennedy, "and it is as well that she should have more knowledge of the world before being finally pledged to any one. By all means let her see people and judge for herself; but remember, Agatha, I will not have her tormented. I have not seen much of Leonard Barrington, and have no right to judge him, but, with or without Throstlethwaite, I don't fancy he is really good enough for her. Still, it is for her to decide for herself, and she may be trusted to know what is for her own happiness. If Leonard is really the right man for her, she will not give him up because he may happen to be poor."

"No: that is the provoking part of it. She is romantic and willful, and if he satisfied *her* standard, she would not mind what Mrs. L'Estrange decided; so the only thing to be done is to keep her out of his way, and do all we can to get her safely married to some one else in the mean time."

"Give her the chance, by all means, but don't attempt to influence her. Her views of life and yours are widely different, and if you did persuade her into anything against her own judgment, you might make her wretched, for she is not gifted with the power of taking things easily."

"Such a pity! Is it not?" said his wife. "But I never went in for views of life, Nigel, so you need not be afraid. Women with views are always a nuisance, and do quantities of mischief by trying to put the world to rights. If Mrs. L'Estrange had only been content to take things as they came and just make the best of them, like an ordinary mortal, what a blessing it would have been! But she *will* try to play the part of Providence, and of course she'll only make a mess of it in the end, as people with high-flown ideas always do."

Colonel Kennedy did not answer. It was of no use to argue with Agatha on such points, and he merely made up his own mind to protect Ruth from the annoyances which might easily arise from the difference between her ways of thinking and feeling and her sister's.

When the plan was made known to Ruth, she entered into it readily and gratefully. She thought it very kind of the Kennedys to wish to have her with them, and very kind of her father to let her go. She was not blind by any means; she was perfectly aware of her mother's reason for arranging such a long absence from home for her, and resented it; but in a pleasant form the change would come, though she knew that in some ways her going away would be a great loss both to Mrs. L'Estrange and Leonard, in others she felt that it would be a gain. Mrs. L'Estrange would be thrown more completely upon Leonard for companionship and sympathy, which would be the greatest advantage to him; and he would be more likely to make an effort to give her his confidence and consult her, when he had no chance of talking things over with Ruth herself.

She was glad to go, for many reasons, on her own account. She felt that the change and amusement would help her to shake off the sense of disappointment and

anxiety by which she could not help feeling herself rather overpowered, while so long an absence would naturally make it easier to meet Leonard again on the same footing as formerly, and would remove the painful consciousness of having a secret understanding with him. If she had remained at home, he would have constantly tried to make opportunities for showing her anything he might write, and for discussing his plans with her in a tone which she could not check without quarreling with him, for she knew that he would not bear it, and which yet she felt herself to blame for encouraging.

During the fortnight which passed before she left home, she scarcely saw him. On the first Sunday, the day after her own return from Throstlethwaite, he had been entirely occupied in helping Mrs. L'Estrange to entertain Mr. Wodehouse, and had been unable to come to Monks-holme, though he had managed to give her a packet of manuscripts when they all met after church. He had contrived to inclose it with a note in a parcel of books, knowing that this would excite no remark, and remembering the success of the same device once before. He asked her to return the papers to him by the post to Edensor, *with comments*, thus securing, as he thought, the beginning of a regular correspondence. Ruth returned the papers as she was desired, and said all she had to say; but she had a strong sense of honor,—she intimated firmly enough that she would not do it again, and Leonard knew that it would be useless to try to persuade her. He was fully occupied, too, in other ways, for the inspection of Mr. Wodehouse had ended in nothing. Mrs. L'Estrange considered him too young and inexperienced, too much the mere fashionable young man wanting something to do, while he took fright at her serious view of his duties.

The question of Kester's Hill settled the matter, and

Mr. Wodehouse disappeared. Mrs. L'Estrange gave Leonard a good deal of writing and other work to do for her, which for the present filled his leisure hours to the exclusion of ambitious attempts at literature; but these were only postponed until the discovery of a suitable agent should set him free again.

Ruth had only one talk with him before she left home. She went with Colonel Kennedy on the last Sunday afternoon to Throstlethwaite to say good-by to Mrs. L'Estrange, and found Leonard there. She took the opportunity to urge him to tell his schemes to his aunt, and to let her help and advise him. Her opinion would be valuable, and the confidence would give her pleasure.

"I'll try to have courage," Leonard said. "I know you are right; but she is rather formidable, you must admit. I may get very admirable criticism if I screw up my nerves to ask for it, but it won't be at all inspiring, as yours is."

"It will be much more really useful to you," answered Ruth, trying to speak indifferently.

She had walked over to Throstlethwaite with her brother-in-law by the fields, and Mrs. L'Estrange and Leonard were walking a little way back with them.

Leonard stopped to fasten a gate, and was long enough about it to allow his aunt and Colonel Kennedy to increase the distance between them and himself and Ruth. Then he said, quickly,—

"Ruth, my evil forebodings from Agatha's return are coming true. I told you I dreaded her influence against me and in favor of——"

"Oh, don't!" exclaimed Ruth; and her voice showed that she was hurt.

"How can I help it?" persisted Leonard. "She is carrying you off to London, and you will have Allonby

with you forever, I know ; and she will urge upon you that he has everything to offer, and that you are free to accept——”

Mrs. L'Estrange had stopped, intending to go no further, and a few steps more must bring them within hearing. Ruth spoke quickly,—

“Why *will* you torment yourself and me so needlessly? If you cannot trust me, how are we to bear all these years before us?”

“I do trust you,” he replied, quickly, almost in a whisper. “I will try not to think about it ; but it is very hard.”

They had joined the others, and no more words were possible. A few minutes were spent in leave-taking, and then, while Mrs. L'Estrange and Leonard turned back towards Throstlethwaite, Ruth and Colonel Kennedy walked on homewards. He saw that she looked white and tired and unhappy.

“She cares more for that fellow than he is worth,” was his silent comment. “I am glad we are taking her out of his reach.”

Ruth was altogether wretchedly uncomfortable. She felt that Leonard was unjust and ungenerous in doubting her, and inconsiderate in thus forcing from her acknowledgments which she ought not to give unless he would openly avow the understanding between them and take the consequences. She was, however, more hurt than indignant, for she believed that he really could not help having these foolish, jealous fancies, and taking any means that he could think of to quiet them. She excused him and she pitied him, but she felt that what he had said would haunt her, and must tend greatly to destroy her pleasure.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE Kennedys and Ruth left Monksholme early in June, and were to be away for at least three months. Ruth had never hitherto been out of England, nor had she ever had any real glimpse of life in London, and her friends not unnaturally hoped that the novelty and excitement might put all sentimental dreams out of her head.

Mr. Charteris, who hated London and hated traveling, always excused himself from ever leaving home (except for short visits to old friends and relatives in their country houses, which he heartily enjoyed) by the unanswerable argument that he could not afford it. His fortune was handsome, but it was not more than sufficient to keep up Monksholme as he chose that it should be kept up, and to meet the inevitably heavy expenses of educating his five sons and starting them in the world. Ruth could not, however, be said to have suffered from any want of society; for her parents were sociable and hospitable, and took their part fully in all county gayeties; but her knowledge of the world had hitherto been gained exclusively from having guests to entertain at home, and being entertained in their houses in return, and thus there had been little variety in her experience of life.

She knew London only from occasional visits of a week or two at a time to friends or relatives, from which she had invariably carried away an impression of confusion and fatigue quite overpowering enjoyment. Exhibitions,

concerts, plays, and operas, were amusing, no doubt, but too many in one week were bewildering; and what she had seen of society seemed to her simply intolerable. She would have liked to meet (even if it had been merely to see them) really distinguished people, with names which she knew and revered; but none such came in her way, for the friends with whom she stayed were all in the same sphere of well-born, affluent, semi-fashionable mediocrity, and the few parties at which she had accidentally been present had appeared to her in no way enjoyable.

Accustomed to the country-house form of society, where rooms were large and numbers few, she thought the crowd and noise and glare intolerable, and wondered how any one could find pleasure under such circumstances. To stand for an hour in a room so full that breathing and moving were almost equally impossible, and in the midst of such a Babel of sound that she must speak at the highest pitch of her voice if she hoped to be heard, even by the person nearest to her, was simply a penance; for even when she met people whom she had known and liked in the country, they seemed to her to have lost all their pleasantness in the fuss of their London engagements.

This year, however, she fully expected to enjoy herself much more, for six weeks must allow of more leisure for comfortable, rational sight-seeing, and it was impossible to imagine either Agatha or Colonel Kennedy encouraging a perpetual state of rush and whirl, whether of business or pleasure.

Both in their different ways were so kind and pleasant that Ruth could not doubt that she should be happy with them; and she was not disappointed. Her expectations of pleasure were founded chiefly on the prospect of Germany and Switzerland later in the summer, but she discovered to her surprise that it might be possible to enjoy

London very much even in the height of the season, for in Sir Everard Kennedy's house she was in a different atmosphere from any in which she had ever been before.

He was a remarkable man, who had spent a long life in hard work, and of late years had held high official positions, and he numbered among his friends and acquaintances many people really worth knowing. He was now in rather bad health and could not go much into society, but as soon as he once more had Agatha to arrange it all for him, he liked to receive his friends at his own house two or three times a week. These parties were a totally new experience to Ruth, while even the ordinary routine of receptions and balls, through which she went with Agatha, ceased to be wearisome as she knew more people, and those of a more interesting kind.

There was a life and movement, an eagerness of interest in questions of real importance, and a variety in the views of those questions, which amused and excited her in this her first glimpse of political and professional life at its centre; and she was not as speedily disenchanted as she might have been, for she heard little of the small personalities which play so large a part in even the real work of the world, because neither Sir Everard nor Colonel Kennedy ever encouraged gossip of any kind, while Agatha's laughing sketches of people and things were so obviously caricatures as to make little impression upon her.

Ruth was happy and bright, but, while Agatha hoped and believed that amusement and admiration were duly doing their work, and driving away all sentimental dreams of patient constancy, and that keen interest in the active life of the world was rapidly preparing her mind to accept a position which would give her as near an approach to a share in it as was open to a woman, she was really looking forward to the time when public life would be the natural

sphere for Leonard, and anticipating her own pleasure in sympathizing with all his interests.

Her happiness was all the more complete because she gathered from Mrs. L'Estrange's frequent letters that all was going well, and that she and Leonard were working harmoniously together. Her affection for him and her trust in him so completely filled her heart that she almost forgot his warning about Agatha's intention of using all her influence in favor of Mr. Allonby, and in truth did not think that his frequent visits were on her account, for he talked chiefly to her sister.

Agatha had tact enough to know that Ruth must not be hurried or startled; she managed matters with her usual dexterity, and at some sacrifice on her own part, for though she cordially desired that Mr. Allonby should marry her sister, she personally thought him exceedingly tedious.

The Allonbys of Nethercroft were almost the most important people in the county, and this man was the eldest son. It would be, as to position and fortune, a brilliant match for Ruth, and Mr. Allonby himself was unexceptionable. He was one of the members for the county, and was rising into public notice as a useful, painstaking man; he was tolerably clever, very well informed, perfectly conscientious, and capable of doing much really good work; but he had not a spark of originality or enthusiasm about him, and Ruth, who had known him all her life, more or less intimately, thought him narrow-minded and dull.

His friends wished him to marry, and he had deliberately decided upon marrying Ruth Charteris, partly perhaps because she was so perfectly free from any wish that he should do so. She satisfied his taste and his judgment in every possible way, and by this time time he was really

as much in love with her as he ever could be with any one ; but his manner was stiff and formal, and conveyed no impression to her mind of any special feeling for herself.

She liked him and respected him, and tried not to show that he wearied her, but sometimes she wondered that Agatha, who was generally rather intolerant of being bored, should encourage him to come so much ; by this time, however, she understood Agatha's social tactics pretty well, and she concluded the reason to be that he was particularly useful in getting tickets for things for which tickets were difficult to obtain and proportionately desirable to have, while as an old family friend he was a perfectly admissible escort on occasions when Colonel Kennedy either could not or would not be with them.

Seven weeks passed quickly, and then they all left England, and Ruth exchanged one form of enjoyment for another. To her, who had never traveled at all, even the hackneyed route from London to Frankfort was full of novelty ; and when they were settled in comfortable apartments at Homburg, where they were to remain three or four weeks, she was prepared to find the watering-place life quite amusing enough to enable her to wait without impatience till they should go on to Switzerland.

They were a cheerful party in themselves, and they had already found some friends among the crowd who filled the little town, while they knew of many more who were likely to come. Colonel Kennedy was perhaps the only one of the party who required to resign himself to his fate, for a German watering-place had not many attractions for an active Englishman in perfect health and without any inclination either to gamble, gossip, or flirt ; but, having come there to please his uncle and his wife, it did not occur to him to grumble.

He was willing to take such amusement as was to be had, and he had supplied himself with plenty of work, for he was not a man who could ever be idle. Knowing that it might be some months before he was again employed professionally, he had set to work, even while at Monksholme, on an elaborate study of all the military systems of Europe, past and present, which might or might not bear fruit in some work of his own upon them, according as leisure and inclination served, but which was interesting to him for the time, and which must be of use to him in one way or another.

It was this which had made Agatha say that Ruth was as good as a secretary to him, for she herself had gladly made over to her sister the task or the privilege, whichever it might be considered, of helping him, both by a more perfect knowledge of modern languages than he possessed and in making extracts. Ruth had translated and copied with ready good nature and genuine interest, and though all such occupation had necessarily ceased for her in the midst of London engagements, she was quite prepared to begin again now, and to be interested in what he had done in the interval, for he had spent a good deal of time at the British Museum collecting fresh materials.

She enjoyed being allowed to share in the work, and only marveled that Agatha should so completely give it up to her. At Monksholme she had supposed that Agatha wished to be free to spend as much time as possible with her mother, and also she then had her children to attend to, which took up more or less of her time; but that was all different now, and when her brother-in-law asked her on the first morning after their arrival at Homburg if she was prepared to be made useful again, though she assented cordially at the moment, she felt it almost necessary to say afterwards to her sister,—

"I suppose as I did it for him at home when you were busy, Nigel thought he must ask me to go on; but are you sure he wouldn't rather have you to help him now?"

Agatha laughed.

"Me? Oh! that is quite out of my line, and I should do no good,—only worry him and bore myself to death! Of course, if you were not there I should have to do it now and then; but I am thankful to escape. Are you sure you don't dislike it too? If you do, and don't want to be troubled, I'll get you off in a minute, by saying it is too much for you."

"I like it extremely," Ruth answered, at once. "It is so good of him to let me help him; only I thought——"

"You are fearfully romantic, Ruth, really!" exclaimed Agatha, with her gay laugh. "My dear child, being Nigel's wife doesn't change my nature, or make me care a bit about all the heavy, prosy things men of that kind fuss about! It is a great pleasure to him, though, no doubt, to have you really interested in it all, and it will help to keep him quiet while we are here,—if you really don't mind."

Ruth only repeated the assurance that she enjoyed it, and allowed the subject to drop. The problem of married life, as exemplified by her sister and her brother-in-law, was beginning to occupy her mind a good deal, and puzzled her seriously.

It was beyond her comprehension that a woman with all Agatha's natural brightness and intelligence should so coolly put aside all idea of trying to share in her husband's interests, and should be content to receive from him merely a sort of affectionate admiration, leaving him to find from others sympathy for all that was best and highest in both heart and mind, if he cared to find it at all. They were to all appearance perfectly happy together, and yet they

lived their lives on a totally different level, without, so far as she could see, any attempt on one side to rise, or on the other to raise.

Ruth could not help being provoked with Agatha's gay indifference to what seemed to her the humiliating position of knowing her husband only on the surface ; and she was rather inclined to blame Colonel Kennedy for not having contrived to improve his wife more in the six years which they had spent together. She speculated and criticised in her own mind with all the severity of inexperience, even while heartily loving them both ; forgetting that it was scarcely reasonable to blame Agatha for not feeling her exclusion from heights and depths which she was utterly incapable of appreciating, and that Colonel Kennedy might perhaps show the truest wisdom in making the best of his wife as she was, instead of tacitly admitting, by ineffectual attempts to alter all her ways of thinking and feeling, that he was conscious of having made a mistake.

He had fallen in love, at an age when he might have known better, with her beauty, graceful manners, and lively spirits, and, though a very few months of life together proved to him that she had neither the wish nor the power to be really a companion, he was wise and just enough not to hold her responsible for his own folly in marrying her, and to content himself with her as she was, thankful to her for being at any rate affectionate, pure-hearted, and womanly, though in a somewhat shallow fashion, failing in none of the duties of wife or mother as they presented themselves to her mind, even though her view of them might not be the highest. He was proud, too, of the beauty and grace and tact which made her so successful in society, and he was idly amused by her un-failing vivacity.

Sometimes he might regret her total want of interest in

his pursuits, and sometimes he was mortified and annoyed by her commonplace, low-toned views of life, but on the whole he was very fond of her ; and (though Ruth in her young romance would have thought it a happiness rather to be despised) their life together was a very happy one, and one which neither of them would have wished to change, even if they could.

When Agatha disclaimed all wish to deprive Ruth of her office as Colonel Kennedy's secretary, the two sisters were together in the balcony of their apartment in the Kisseleff Strasse, and as Sir Everard, returning from a visit to his banker, stopped under the window to ask some question about plans for the afternoon's amusement, he felt reasonably proud of the appearance of the two ladies for whom he considered himself responsible.

Agatha's pretty figure, delicate, regular features, and lovely complexion, with her blue eyes and masses of glossy fair hair, gave her claims to admiration which never failed to be acknowledged, especially as voice and smile and manner always enhanced the attraction.

Sir Everard was one of her most devoted adherents ; and with good reason, for she had studied his comfort and his taste in every possible way, and had made his house all that he wished it to be ; but even he, as he now looked up at the two sisters, perceived that though there might be more diversity of opinion as to Ruth's actual beauty, there was something in her face which was wanting in Agatha's. Ruth was the taller of the two, but Agatha was certain to be noticed more quickly, for her sister's coloring was not nearly so striking. Ruth's features were quite as good, but her eyes were gray and her hair dark, while her complexion was much less brilliant. Sir Everard decidedly thought that, though he himself admired Agatha the most, Ruth was undeniably a handsome, attractive-

looking girl; and he could imagine that people who did really admire her might think that there was no comparison possible between her beauty and her sister's, for it was certainly of a higher type.

He had heard from Agatha enough of the story of Leonard Barrington and Throstlethwaite to excite his interest, and to account for Ruth's occasional fits of silence and abstraction; while he knew from the same source that Mr. Allonby had spoken to Agatha of his hopes and wishes before they left London, and had announced an intention of following them as soon as his public duties allowed him to do so. His worldly wisdom had led him to sympathize with Agatha's view of the question, and to hope that he might come and succeed; but at this moment, as he looked up at Ruth, he could not help thinking that if she did marry Douglas Allonby he should be really sorry for it.

"A girl with her face never *could* love that machine of a man," he said to himself; "and she is too good to be wasted on him just because he is a great match. She may do it, perhaps: if she can't marry as she wishes, she may fall back on ambition,—one never knows."

At any rate, the progress of the affair would supply a little excitement to enliven the monotonous dullness of watering-place life.

CHAPTER XIV.

SIR EVERARD had all the punctuality of an old soldier, and every morning, exactly at seven, he was ready to go down to the wells and begin his prescribed course of water-drinking and walking. He liked a companion, and as

Ruth was naturally an early riser it had very soon become an understood thing that she should be the one to accompany him. The whole thing was so new to her that she really enjoyed it, and they soon knew so many people that the two hours to be spent before breakfast in walking or sitting in the gardens passed very pleasantly.

Colonel Kennedy seldom appeared at all. He much preferred going off alone into the woods, and was grateful to Ruth for enabling him to do so by keeping his uncle company, for he considered walking up and down in the midst of a gossiping mob an unattractive process at any time, and even more so than usual in the early morning.

Agatha found it tiring to come for more than a short time, and therefore rarely joined them until after eight, having quickly discovered that it was socially much pleasanter after that hour.

One morning, about a week after their arrival, Ruth was standing at the book-stall near the Kaiser-Brunnen, amusing herself by looking over the books, while she waited till Sir Everard should finish an apparently interminable chat with another old general; she felt a touch on her shoulder, and, looking round, found that it came from the parasol of a lady in a chair, which had been drawn up very near her. She was evidently an invalid, sweet and delicate and refined-looking, with perfectly white hair, and a face which bore such legible traces of sickness and sorrow that Ruth thought it possible she might not be really as old as she appeared to be.

"I beg your pardon," she said, in a voice as sweet and refined as her face, "but is not this yours? We thought we saw you drop it as we followed you along the avenue."

She showed a little gold solitaire as she spoke,—a dog's head most exquisitely executed.

Ruth took it eagerly.

"Thank you so much ! Yes, it is mine, and I should have been so sorry to lose it, for the set would have been spoiled ; and I could never have replaced it, as it was given to me on my last birthday by——"

While she was speaking, she exhibited its fellow on one wrist, and fastened it into the other cuff, from which it had dropped ; but as she came to the end of her sentence she stopped short. The set of solitaires had been Frank L'Estrange's last gift to her, and the thought of him always saddened her.

"As you have found a friend, Ruth, I will go for a turn with General Grantley," said Sir Everard, as he passed her. "I shall not be long."

He was gone before she could answer, and she turned in some embarrassment to repeat her thanks to the lady in the chair, thinking that she would then find a seat, and wait till Sir Everard should return, or some one whom she could join should happen to pass. Before she could speak, however, she met so pleasant a smile of comprehension and amusement from the invalid that she could not help laughing.

"Your father did not know I was a stranger when he proposed to leave you in my charge ; but may not I profit by his mistake ? I am to wait here till my son comes back to me, and if my chair is drawn to that vacant bench, will you not take compassion on my solitude ? I know no one in all this moving crowd."

Ruth smiled. The lady's manner was winning and her face interesting, and she was rather glad of an excuse for seeing more of her.

"He is not my father," she replied, "and, of course, he thought that I knew you, or he would not have imposed me on you so coolly. You are very kind, and I shall be glad to sit with you till he comes back."

They established themselves comfortably in the shade, and proceeded to make acquaintance.

"I don't think I have seen you here before this morning?" said Ruth. "One soon knows people by sight, and there are only a few who come down in chairs."

"We only arrived yesterday," was the reply. "We have been at Wildbad for a month,—all for me,—and now I am to be here for some time. I had a rheumatic fever early in the spring, and I have not yet quite recovered from it, but Wildbad has nearly cured me, and all I am supposed to want now is strength. My son brought me down here, and is now gone to move our belongings from the hotel into lodgings. As I cannot be of any use, I am better quite out of the way."

There was a slight touch of pain in the tone in which those last words were spoken, and Ruth wondered what it meant, as she answered,—

"It is probably a pleasant novelty to him to be allowed to do your work as well as his own, while you are still an invalid."

"Not much of a novelty, I am afraid," was the reply, with a sigh. Then, with the natural well-bred instinct of not inflicting personal matters upon a stranger, she began to ask questions about the place and the people, which Ruth answered brightly; and so they gradually fell into pleasant talk, and it was with some regret on both sides that they saw Sir Everard returning along the avenue with Agatha, who had joined him in the interval. They paused when a few yards off, to speak to some acquaintance, and Ruth rose to go to them.

"My friends have come back for me," she said, with a smile, "and I must join them. Thank you for letting me stay with you; and thanks, too, once more, for my solitaire."

"I must share those with my son," was the reply, "for, though I saw it on the path, he picked it up, and left it with me to give to you, for it was he who was so certain that it was yours."

"I am very grateful to him for having such quick eyes," said Ruth. "I should have been very sorry to lose it. Everybody here is always doing the same thing and haunting the same places, so we are sure to meet often, and I hope you will let me come and sit by your chair sometimes and tell you the news, for my people know everybody, and we hear it all, both true and false."

The invalid was returning a cordial answer, and each was resolving to try, meanwhile, to find out the other's name, when a quick step near them made both look round, and Ruth, to her extreme surprise, found herself face to face with the gentleman whom she so well remembered rowing across Brideswater on that spring afternoon from which all the troubles of her life seemed to date. Of the two, however, perhaps the lady in the chair was the most astonished, when she saw the recognition between her son and this charming stranger. There was a momentary hesitation and embarrassment on both sides; then, as he came forward raising his hat, but apparently uncertain whether to speak or not, Ruth held out her hand cordially, and said, with a blush and a laugh,—

"I must thank you for finding this for me," touching her wrist as she spoke.

"I knew it was yours," he replied. "You wore them that day; and I remember them perfectly."

"You had a good view of them when I was rowing," she answered, smiling. "I hope, after all, you caught your train and suffered no inconvenience in consequence of your timely help to my willful little Quiz."

"Thanks to you, I was in ample time," he said. "I

hope——” But his hopes were destined to be silenced ; for Ruth, seeing Agatha rather impatiently beckoning to her, said, quickly,—

“I beg pardon, but my sister is calling me : I must go.”

Then, turning to his mother, she added,—

“I shall hope to meet you again.”

And the next moment she was absorbed into a group of the most fashionable people then in the place, who were arranging an excursion for that day, to the top of the Feldberg.

“You know her?” said the invalid. “Who is she ? Where have you met her?”

“She is a Miss Charteris, and I met her by accident this spring, when I was walking through the Lake country, on my way back from Glasgow. Her dog got buried in a hole, and I helped her to dig him out, and then, as I was rather short of time to catch a train, she rowed me across the lake to the nearest station.”

“And you recognized her this morning?”

“Yes, of course. She isn't the kind of girl one would not know again. I saw her when we were listening to the band, at the other end.”

“Then why did you not take her the stud when you picked it up, instead of leaving it to me?”

“I did not know that she might care to have to acknowledge my acquaintance here, and I had no notion of forcing myself upon her. They're a fashionable set, mother, and quite out of our line. However, it can't be helped now ; and, after all, it matters very little. How did she come to be with you?”

His mother explained, adding,—

“She is very simple and charming.”

“It won't make much difference to us, anyhow,” re-

plied her son. "Now, we had better be making our way up to our new quarters. I ordered breakfast before I came down again for you."

Ruth saw them turn up the road leading to the town, but she knew that she must wait for another meeting to find out who they were, for she was hopelessly surrounded. The plan for the day, and the careful arranging of the party who were to join in it, occupied Agatha entirely for the time, and it was not till they were at breakfast that she remembered to ask Ruth who the new people were. Then Ruth explained, laughing, that she had not the least idea, and told the story of her adventure in the spring, and of her unexpected encounter of that morning.

"It will be easy enough to find out who they are," said Agatha; "but really, Ruth, you ought to be rather more careful before you rush into an acquaintance with people at a place of this kind."

"An invalid old lady in a chair cannot be a very dangerous acquaintance, at any rate," said Colonel Kennedy. "However, you must point them out on the first opportunity, Ruth, and we will investigate."

The opportunity came sooner than they expected. Before eleven that morning two wagonettes with four horses were standing under the trees at the foot of the Kisseleff Strasse, waiting for the party who were going up the Feldberg to collect. Servants were bustling about with shawls and hampers, and the various ladies and gentlemen were standing round, only waiting the coming of the great lady of the party to settle themselves in the carriages and start.

"There, Nigel!" said Ruth, touching her brother-in-law's arm. "This tall man coming towards us with letters in his hand is the son of my dear old lady. He must pass us to get to the pillar at the corner: let us speak to

him, and find out what their name is, and where they are staying ; for I am sure they are nice people, and she knows nobody and is lonely."

Before Colonel Kennedy could answer, the gentleman on his way to the letter-box had reached the group, on the outskirts of which they were standing. He was passing with merely a bow to Ruth ; but she knew quite as well as any one how to carry her point in such matters when she chose, and she spoke,—

"We are going off for a long expedition up the Feldberg, and back by Königstein."

It seemed a natural explanation of all the commotion, and it answered her purpose, for he stopped and said he "was afraid they would find it very hot."

"I dare say we shall," said Ruth, quietly ; then with a very slight blush and a smile, she added, "I should like to introduce you to my brother-in-law—Colonel Kennedy—only——"

And the pause sufficiently conveyed the question she wished to ask.

Colonel Kennedy was amused ; for not even Agatha herself could have done it more easily.

The stranger hesitated for a moment, and then said, frankly,—

"I remember having the pleasure of meeting Colonel Kennedy several years ago, at Chelsfield. My name is Stephen Powys."

Colonel Kennedy responded, cordially,—

"I thought I knew your face, but I should not have remembered the name belonging to it. I need scarcely apologize, though, for at your age seven years change a man a good deal. I am glad to meet you again."

The party was now complete, and all were impatient to be off, so that Ruth and Colonel Kennedy were obliged

to turn away rather abruptly, the latter only finding time to say, hurriedly,—

“We are sure to meet in the evening.”

Ruth had been silent in extreme astonishment. This sudden discovery of Stephen Powys was puzzling; but she had no time to think about it, for she was in one of the carriages, with a large and lively party who claimed all her attention, while Colonel Kennedy, the only person to whom she cared to speak on the subject, was on the box of the other. She had to keep her speculations to herself during the whole day, for none of the rest of the party would have been in the least interested about the question of why an insignificant young man, who had been supposed to have gone to America, should now turn up in Homburg, and she had no opportunity for talking to her brother-in-law apart. The day was a successful one. The weather was fine, the view was clear, and the air delicious; the party were well assorted, and, even after a merry picnic on the top of the mountain and the long drive down, no one seemed sorry that they had previously arranged to dine together at the Kursaal at half-past seven.

They all dispersed to their several lodgings with time only to dress and meet again. As Agatha passed through the little salon to her room, she took up a card lying on the table, which had evidently been left during their absence. After looking at it, she handed it to her sister, with a smile which implied that it concerned her more than any one, and passed on into her room.

Ruth stood there for a moment with Mr. Allonby's card in her hand, while she read the words written in pencil on it,—

“I have just arrived. Your servant tells me that you and the Grantleys and Hazelwoods all dine together at the

Kursaal. I hope I shall not do wrong in arranging to join your party."

There could be no possible reason why Mr. Allonby should not come to Homburg if he chose; and, having come, there was nothing either cool or unnatural in his thus joining himself to a party all of whom he knew more or less, and several of whom were intimate friends; but Agatha's smile implied that she, at any rate, assumed that he had come for her sister's sake, and Ruth was, for the moment, very angry indeed.

She suddenly perceived the meaning of all Agatha's quiet encouragement of Mr. Allonby's constant visits in London, and of his being allowed to join them so incessantly wherever they went; and, whether he really meant anything or not, or whether it was only a scheme of her sister's, she deeply resented it. That Agatha, knowing—as Ruth felt sure she must know—that she looked upon herself as pledged to Leonard, should deliberately seek and persistently encourage another lover, was intolerable. It was worldly and low and unkind,—placing her in an awkward and humiliating position, and making her unconsciously appear a party to doing what she considered heartless and degrading.

She tossed the card indignantly on the table, with a strong inclination—which, however, she had the good sense to resist—to profess herself too tired to go to the Kursaal, and so spend the evening alone at home. Second thoughts showed her that she had better not appear to notice that she was supposed to be responsible for Mr. Allonby's arrival, but trust to herself to show quietly and plainly, both to him and Agatha, that she would much have preferred his staying away if he had really come on her account.

No choice, however, was given to her as to the arrange-

ment of the party. It was generally imagined that Mr. Allonby was an almost declared lover of hers, and therefore every one instinctively played into Agatha's hands, so that Ruth was helpless to prevent herself from being placed next to him. When there, she was almost inclined to laugh at herself for fancying him in the least disposed to disturb her peace, for his matter-of-fact conversation and quiet manner were as little lover-like as possible. She found, however, that he would not leave her during the evening. Whether they sat on the terrace to drink coffee and listen to the band, or whether they walked round the gambling-rooms (which were open for the last year), he remained in close attendance upon her. She had no resource but to endure it, for every one seemed determined to leave him to her; and she could not even take refuge with Colonel Kennedy, for immediately on coming out from dinner he had met an old friend of his school-boy days, and, deserting the ladies altogether, had gone to smoke and talk with him in the less select crowd in the garden below the terrace.

Ruth saw nothing of Mrs. Powys. She was probably too great an invalid to be out late. Her son was visible once or twice, either looking on at the play or passing along the terrace; but he was each time alone, and never came within possible speaking-distance of the conspicuous and fashionable group of which Ruth was an unwilling member.

She could only make up her mind that when she went down to the wells the next morning she would take very good care to keep out of Mr. Allonby's way, and would also solve the mystery of this sudden appearance of Mr. Powys. Fortunately, each step she could take towards succeeding most effectually in one object would help her also to success in the other.

CHAPTER XV.

THE office of morning companion to Sir Everard was by this time merely nominal, for he had so many acquaintances that Ruth never felt any hesitation in leaving him if she wished it.

"I see Mrs. Powys over there, in her chair, Sir Everard," she said, the next morning, not long after they went out. "I am going to talk to her for a little while."

He merely said, "Very well. You will easily find me somewhere about, if you want to join me again," and continued talking to his friends, while Ruth quickly left the colonnade and went to join Mrs. Powys, whose chair was placed not far from where the band was playing.

Mrs. Powys smiled, well pleased to see her, and said it was very kind of her to come to amuse her.

Ruth pointed out a few notabilities, described their excursion of the day before, and then, after a while, said, rather shyly,—

"I suppose your son told you how we met once before?—but I had no idea who he was until he told us his name afterwards, and said that he had known my brother-in-law long ago."

"I think I recollect Colonel Kennedy, too," replied Mrs. Powys. "He was only Captain then, but he used to be at our house near Chelsford with the other officers. Stephen told me that he remembered him; but we have lived quite out of the world ever since that time."

"I hope you won't think me too impertinent," Ruth

began, "but I want so much to ask you one or two questions. Some friends of mine tried to find out Mr. Powys this spring,—they wanted to persuade him to undertake an agency: they were told that he had left his home in Devonshire, and that his address was not known, but that his friends believed him to have gone to America. They therefore reluctantly gave up the search for him, and it was a great disappointment to Frank L'Estrange."

Mrs. Powys looked very much surprised.

"L'Estrange?" she said. "Ah! there was a little boy of that name who was at school with my poor boy. Was it the same?"

"Yes. He was ill,—dying; but his mother wanted an agent for her property, and Frank set his heart on finding out Mr. Powys, having been told that it was the kind of office he would undertake, and remembering him with enthusiastic admiration. Mrs. L'Estrange sent to London to inquire about him, and that was what she heard."

"But from whom?"

"From a Mr. Hillyer."

"Impossible, my dear Miss Charteris! Mr. Hillyer has always known Stephen's address, and knows quite well that his negotiation about work in America came to nothing. Our home in Devonshire is still our home; but Stephen would be very glad, now, to go elsewhere if he could get anything to do, and I long for it for him more than I can tell you, for I have been such a drag upon him all these years, and have only lately begun to see it. There must have been some strange mistake. I am very sorry if in consequence of it Stephen has lost the chance of anything that would have been good for him. I cannot understand it. Did Mrs. L'Estrange write to Mr. Hillyer himself about it?"

"No. Frank had heard accidentally from some old

school-friend that he was sure Mr. Hillyer would know Mr. Powys's address ; he was so eager to have him found that he persuaded his mother to send his cousin up to London at once, to inquire personally ; and this was the result."

"It is very odd. Perhaps Stephen may be able to explain it. He will be coming to look after me soon, and I hope you will ask him. It is such a pity ! Not that he will mind it nearly so much as I do for him, I dare say, or at any rate he won't allow that he does ; but if you knew how he has sacrificed his life for me, you would understand my longing to see something of brightness and prosperity come to him. Even though I had no share in bringing it, I should feel it a relief to my conscience."

Ruth scarcely liked to ask any leading questions, although she would have been glad to hear more about their past life, for Mrs. Powys was so evidently an invalid who was easily excited, that it seemed hardly fair to take advantage of her readiness to speak.

"It is impossible to know whether this agency of Mrs. L'Estrange's would have been at all the sort of thing Mr. Powys would have liked ; but, if it should be, I do not think it is even now too late for him to inquire about it. At least, she had not appointed any one when I heard from her a few days ago."

"Then you will tell him about it?" said Mrs. Powys, eagerly. "Miss Charteris, if your brother-in-law knew us long ago at Chelsfield, of course you know something of the misfortunes which changed Stephen's life so terribly ; but very few people know anything of the special reason I have for so earnestly desiring to see him once more in the way towards occupying some position worthy of him. I cannot forget that all his troubles have been of my causing."

They were sitting a little way from the crowded paths, and could talk without interruption. Ruth had, at this moment, the satisfaction of seeing Mr. Allonby obliged to content himself with only a recognition from her, and join other friends, and she listened all the more readily to Mrs. Powys, who continued as if it were a relief to her to speak to some one :

“To begin with, he is only my stepson. I married his father when he was quite a child, and he was always very dear to me ; but I am not his mother. My own boy was many years younger ; he was drowned one summer, in bathing. My husband’s health was failing then, and both his judgment and his power of work were far from what they had been. He felt our boy’s death nearly as much as I did, and I was anxious about him. I persuaded him, against Stephen’s wishes and advice, to take a brother-in-law of mine into partnership, and to trust a great deal of the management of affairs to him, for Stephen himself was still at college. This man was clever, plausible, and dishonest. It is a common story enough, I suppose, and cannot be very interesting to a stranger, but it was a real tragedy to us. He gained my husband’s confidence, who left more and more in his power as he himself grew less fit for business, and so the crash came. The shock, and the sense of disgrace, killed him, and all the burden was left on Stephen’s shoulders,—a mere boy of two-and-twenty, who had been brought up as the heir to great wealth.”

“And he behaved nobly, we were told,” said Ruth, as Mrs. Powys paused. “It was a hard trial for him, no doubt.”

“He gave up everything, even the property which had been settled on his mother, and was indisputably his, in order that all claims might be satisfied. We kept only a small property of mine, a farm on the edge of Dartmoor,

which came to me from my grandfather, and which I could not part with, because it was settled upon my sister's children in case of my leaving none of my own. I think all the sorrows of that year had affected my brain, or I *could* not have been so miserably weak and selfish as I was. I was really ill, and I seemed to have no power to think, except of myself. I urged Stephen to live with me on this farm, out of reach of the world and of the echo of our misfortunes and disgrace. He went with me there,—it was a place I had known and loved as a child,—and for my sake, as I found afterwards, he refused several offers of a fresh start in life, which were made to him at once by friends of his father's. My life and reason seemed to depend on my being allowed to live at this place on which I had set my fancy, and on his being with me; but I knew nothing at the time of all that he gave up for me. I knew only that I had peace and rest and everything that was necessary for my comfort and health. If I did not believe, now, that for the time I had really lost my power of mind (although I was apparently sane enough), the thought of the sacrifice I accepted would be an even more intolerable burden than it is."

"But of course he could not leave you when you were so ill," said Ruth; "and he has plenty of time before him still."

"But he will probably never again have the same opportunities," replied Mrs. Powys. "The help was offered and refused, and people are naturally soon allowed to drop out of notice if they appear to wish it. If he had then accepted either of the three offers made to him, he would by this time have been in a very different position from what he is now, for he is clever and determined, and works hard. I buried him down there and stopped all chance of a career worthy of him. We were poor, for

my little farm, though he managed it admirably, could not bring in more than a hundred a year, and yet I never missed one necessary comfort. He took one good servant with us there, my maid, who had been his nurse and also my boy's, and she has done for us all that I ought to have done. She managed the house and the dairy and the poultry, and waited on me, and I was contented to enjoy the comfort and never even wondered how Stephen found the means to pay for it! He took any kind of work he could get in addition to his own farming. He acted as agent for one or two small properties near us of which the owners were absent, he undertook to manage some stone-quarries not far off, and even with all this wretched slavery he filled up his spare hours in sketching, for he was a first-rate amateur artist, and sold drawing after drawing to some dealer he knew, getting absurdly low prices for them, of course; but, as he said afterwards, they cost him nothing, so every pound was clear gain, and no sum was too small to be acceptable. I learned all this gradually as I grew stronger, but have only known it fully within the last year."

"I do not wonder at your wishing for some good fortune for him," said Ruth, whose sympathy was fully enlisted, "but you should not let yourself be too anxious about it. Mr. Powys does not look as if he had been leading an unhappy life."

"He always makes the best of things," replied Mrs. Powys, "and he is naturally cheerful. But what I think of is, that now, at nine-and-twenty, instead of being prosperous and on the way to wealth and distinction, as I am sure he might have been, he is still poor and unknown, without prospects, almost without friends, and dependent upon daily toil of head and hands for everything. If I were to die to-morrow I could not even leave him the

little I have, and I ask myself incessantly, are my life and health worth the price at which they have been saved? Since I have been comparatively well, and we have seen something of our relations and of a few old friends, I have learned the truth, and I have urged him to seek any promising opening and either to leave me or to take me with him as might seem best; but so far he has failed to find anything better than what he has; and now this illness of mine, and the expense of coming to these German baths, is using up even the small sum he had managed to save to meet any accidental necessities. I did not wish him to bring me, for I could not even come without a maid; but he only laughed, and said savings were meant for rainy days, and that a rheumatic fever made a very rainy day indeed! He cannot stay away any longer himself now, but he is to leave me here and come back for me in a few weeks. I feel that his life has been sacrificed to mine, and all his gifts devoted to the useless task of supporting and nursing me; and the thought of such a waste of power for such an end weighs me down with a constant regret that I had strength to live at all through that time of trouble and shame and sorrow."

Ruth was very much interested in Mrs. Powys's confidences, and the fact of having previously heard so much about Stephen from Frank L'Estrange made it scarcely seem unnatural that it should all be told to a stranger. She could quite understand the regret and self-reproach which Mrs. Powys expressed and seemed to feel so keenly, but she saw also that she was so much of a nervous invalid as to make the excitement of speaking of it very bad for her, and she was therefore not sorry to see Stephen himself coming towards them. His arrival of course stopped the conversation.

As soon as he had spoken to Ruth he went down to the

well to bring his mother her appointed glass of water, after which he said that she had been stationary quite long enough and must go for a turn round the gardens. He was going to summon the man who drew her chair, when she stopped him.

"But we must not desert Miss Charteris, Stephen, until she can join her party. She has been kindly sitting with me almost ever since you left me."

Stephen turned to Ruth with a pleasant smile.

"I don't think Miss Charteris imagines that I meant to suggest that you should treat her so ungratefully, mother. I was cool enough to hope that she would walk with us until she was summoned away by her friends."

Ruth smiled.

"And I shall like to do so very much. I have been talking all this time to Mrs. Powys, and now I really want to talk to *you*, for we cannot make out why an attempt which Frank L'Estrange made to find you this spring failed so completely."

Mr. Powys looked round at her in surprise.

"I don't really know in what way it failed," he said. "It rested, as I understood, with Mrs. L'Estrange to write to me if she thought of going further in the matter; and, as I never heard from her, of course I assumed that she had found some one else whom she thought more likely to suit her."

Ruth was for a moment too completely bewildered to speak. What could he mean? Before she had so far recovered from her surprise as to be able to ask a question, her attention was claimed by her sister, who had by this time made her appearance (rather earlier than usual) and now came up to them with Mr. Allonby, who had joined her as soon as she entered the avenue.

Ruth was prepared to resist the same sort of imperative

summons which had interrupted her conversation with the Powyses the morning before ; but Agatha's tactics now were totally different.

"I am fortunate in finding you here," she said, "for I want you to introduce me to your friends, Ruth."

As soon as Ruth had complied with her request, she continued, with the bright, graceful, gracious manner which always served her so well,—

"My husband has been telling me of all your kind hospitality to him in former days, Mrs. Powys, and I was hoping to have the pleasure of calling upon you to-day ; but this is far better. Meetings out of doors are much pleasanter than formal calls, in a place of this sort, and I am so glad to have met you this morning. Colonel Kennedy scarcely ever comes down among the morning mob, —he likes a long walk in the woods better ; but he is looking forward to renewing his acquaintance with you. If you are a walker, Mr. Powys, I dare say he will try to inveigle you into deserting these frivolous haunts another day, and going off with him."

She had contrived all the time, by glance and gesture, to speak both to Mrs. Powys and her son, and Ruth had therefore no resource. She could not, without positive rudeness, refuse to begin to talk to Mr. Allonby ; and she knew by experience that, once allowed a fair start, he was singularly impossible to stop.

"You were going to walk," Agatha said. "Do not let me stop you. We can all take a turn together."

And she moved on by Mrs. Powys's chair, keeping Stephen by her side ; she made herself as charming as possible to them both, and Ruth was obliged to follow with Mr. Allonby, and gave him as much of her attention as she could, while she was longing to be able to get at some explanation of this apparent mystery.

When they had gone once along the avenue and had reached the Kaiser Brunnen, Agatha thought she had done enough, and prepared to break up the party. Repeating her assurances of pleasure at having met them, and her hopes of seeing them often while they all remained at Homburg, she added,—

“For the present, we must all go our separate ways. *You* are probably going out of the crowd into the quieter part of the gardens, and *we* are going to shop. Ruth, I have promised Mr. Allonby that we will go and protect him in bargaining for strings of onyx beads for his sisters, and you will be of more use than I shall, for I am not strong in German.”

“They all speak English,” began Ruth, though with little hope of protesting successfully.

“But only like parrots,” said Mr. Allonby. “They cannot really tell you anything, except in their own language; and I was in hopes you would come and interpret for me, as I want to get some information about the way in which they prepare these stones for the market. I fancy they are very much made up for sale.”

Ruth recognized with annoyance that Agatha had been too much for her, and she was resigning herself to her fate, when they were suddenly joined by Colonel Kennedy, who had come down for the express purpose of seeing what was going on among them, and of preventing Ruth from being tormented. His first duty, however, was to speak to Mrs. Powys, and Agatha said, quickly,—

“You will find us at the stalls over there, if you want us, Nigel. Come, Ruth! It will be getting near breakfast-time if we dawdle much longer, and Mr. Allonby is waiting for us.”

“Don’t carry off Ruth,” said Colonel Kennedy, looking round; “I want her. I came down to look for her,

and I am going to take her up into the town with me to interpret for me at a little book-shop, too insignificant for its owner to speak English."

Agatha never by any chance openly opposed her husband. She laughed, and said,—

"Very well: if you want Ruth, of course we must do without her. Will you trust yourself to make purchases with only my supervision, Mr. Allonby, or shall we go and look after Sir Everard, and leave the onyxes till another time, when Ruth can come too? I think I can manage to spend your money judiciously for you; but if you are wishing for sensible and useful information about trade interests, local methods of work, and so on, I should only disgrace myself signally, and we had better all come together, later in the day."

Ruth was obliged, in common civility, to answer Mr. Allonby's immediate appeal to her by a promise to go with him "some other time;" and then, to her great relief, he and Agatha went away together in search of other acquaintances. A grateful glance told Colonel Kennedy that his interference had been acceptable.

"If you and Miss Charteris are going into the town," said Stephen, "do not let us detain you. My mother was only going for a turn in the gardens for the sake of the air, and we can go in your direction if you will allow us."

This suited every one very well, and in another minute they were moving on, Colonel Kennedy walking by Mrs. Powys, and Ruth following with Stephen.

"There has been some strange mistake, Mr. Powys," she began at once. "Mrs. L'Estrange understood that you had left Devonshire and gone to America, so that it was of no use to think of seeking you, and Frank was very much disappointed. Why did you not go to see him that day when you went round Brideswater?" she

added, as that recollection suddenly occurred to her. "It would have made everything so easy."

"I had no notion that he remembered me," was the reply. "I had known him some years before as a small boy,—a friend of my little brother; but I had neither seen nor heard of him since that time, and had almost forgotten his existence. I was reminded of it by being in that country and hearing his name; but, even supposing that I should have called there under other circumstances, I should have given up all idea of it when I heard that he was dying."

"And you never even asked about him!" said Ruth. "I wish you had."

"I never once thought of him," Stephen answered.

He did not say, or even imply, that he had thought of nothing but herself during that row across the lake, but somehow she knew that it had been so. She spoke again at once:

"It was that very evening that Mrs. L'Estrange's agent died, and Frank proposed to her to seek for you. He had retained a warm impression of your kindness to him as a child; and, having heard from some one not very long before that Mr. Hillyer would know all about you, he set his heart on his mother finding you and offering you the agency, and persuaded her to send his cousin to London at once, to see Mr. Hillyer and get your address."

"I am sure I do not know what I had ever done to earn such kind remembrance," said Stephen, "though when I was reminded of him I recollected having been very much attracted by the little fellow when I had him under my charge with Dick. Well, Miss Charteris, so far your story and mine agree well enough, for I heard all this from Hillyer afterwards. But what happened next? The cousin went to London and saw Hillyer, did he not?"

"Yes. He went up in two or three days, but found Mr. Hillyer out of town. He waited for a week, and then wrote that he had seen him and had heard from him that you had left Devonshire, that he could not give your present address, and that when last he had heard from you, you were on the point of accepting some employment in America. Under these circumstances there seemed no use in making further inquiries, and it was given up. Frank was very much disappointed, especially as when Leonard came home he said that, from all Mr. Hillyer had told him, there could be no doubt that you would have been just the person Mrs. L'Estrange wanted, if there had been any chance of finding you."

Stephen stopped short as she ceased speaking.

"What an extraordinary muddle!" he exclaimed, with a laugh. "Either Hillyer or the man who went to him for information must have been dreaming! It happened that I was accidentally in London on business for a couple of days just at that time. It was some time since I had either written to Hillyer or heard from him, and I called at his chambers and saw him. I told him that my attempt at getting work with good pay in America had come to nothing, that I had failed equally in getting an appointment at Glasgow (which I had been to apply for when I first saw you on Brideswater), and that I was, in fact, just where I had always been. He then told me that he was glad to hear it, for that he thought something had turned up which would suit me a great deal better. He recalled Frank L'Estrange to my memory, and said that his cousin had been there only that morning to ask for my address, which he had given. He told me also that he had gone so far as to say that if I were still free he was sure it was the sort of thing I should like, but that he could not be sure of my being free, as he knew that I had been apply-

ing for employment in America. He had further added that he believed I was not then at home, but that any letter addressed to me there would be forwarded at once. I understood him to say that the inquiries were made by a nephew of Mrs. L'Estrange's, who was himself the next heir to the property, and who had finally said that he would report all Hillyer had told him to his aunt, and that then, if she wished to carry the negotiation further, she would write to me direct, at once. I went home the next day, but no letter ever came; and from that day to this I have heard nothing more of the matter."

"And you never inquired why?"

"No. Why should I? Indeed, how could I? I was told that if I were wanted I should be written to; and when no letter came, of course I thought that Mrs. L'Estrange had found some one else whom she preferred, and that it had been only one more hope just lighted in order to go out! Then I saw young L'Estrange's death in the papers very soon afterwards, and I supposed that his mother perhaps naturally shrank from having any one who was connected in her mind only with him."

"On the contrary, it would have been a great reason to her for desiring that you should come," said Ruth. "It has all been very unfortunate; but I cannot even now understand how you can so completely have mistaken what Mr. Hillyer said to Leonard."

"There was no mistake on my part, Miss Charteris, and I don't think Hillyer is a man to muddle things. I remember accurately enough what he told me, for it was a matter of too much importance to me to be forgotten. I dare say it may seem a trifling thing to you, but the idea of it was new life to me, and I confess it was a disappointment to me when nothing came of it. But that is all over long ago, and whatever the mistake was it can't be helped

now, so there is no use in thinking any more about it. Mr. L'Estrange probably had many other things to think of, and not much interest in the details of my affairs, so that he may easily have misunderstood Hillyer and then have treated it all in the off-hand style which I remember of old was the way of young men with no cares of their own to teach them that even trifles are better for accurate attention."

He spoke lightly, but still Ruth saw that it had been a very real disappointment; she was sorry, and she was also much puzzled as to how Leonard could have contrived to make such a blunder. It was just the sort of carelessness which would annoy Mrs. L'Estrange extremely. She felt convinced that the fault was really his, for she knew that he was thoughtless; but, with the natural instinct of trying to defend him and throw the blame on the absent Mr. Hillyer, she said, quickly, with a bright, sudden blush,—

"I am sure that no one will be more sorry for the mistake when he knows it, however it may have arisen; and no one will be more glad that it is not yet too late to put it right. Mrs. L'Estrange must be written to at once. But one thing makes me hope that the blame of the confusion may be Mr. Hillyer's:—he has not even given you the name correctly. His name is not L'Estrange at all, and he is not in the sort of position which you think may have made him so indifferent to trifles. He is not Mrs. L'Estrange's own nephew, but her husband's; and, though they adopted him years ago, he has nothing to do with the property. He is now, perhaps, since Frank's death, the most *likely* person for her to choose to succeed her, but that is all; and he has been poor enough and dependent enough all his life to make him quite realize the importance of a good appointment."

Stephen could not help guessing the truth as to her in-

terest in the man she was so eagerly defending. Her changing color, her half-shy eagerness, and her avoidance of his name, even as she explained the mistake, spoke plainly enough.

"I don't think Hillyer mentioned any name, or if he did I missed hearing it. He spoke of a nephew, and was under the impression that he was the next heir; but naturally the particulars of work and salary were what I thought of most, and I understood that I was to hear from Mrs. L'Estrange herself if she fancied trying me. After all, it matters very little how the mistake was made; for either it is past setting to rights, in which case the less said the better, or else, if, as you seem to think, I have still a chance, there is no harm done and I need owe no one a grudge for the mistake, whether it were Hillyer who made it, or——?"

"His name is Leonard Barrington," replied Ruth, "and I am sure he will be very glad that we have met you here before it was too late. You had better write to Mrs. L'Estrange to-day—and so, of course, will I—to explain about it all. What shall——"

"Leonard Barrington!" Stephen exclaimed, with a look of sudden enlightenment, contempt, and indignation which checked Ruth's question abruptly. "I quite understand it now. I can easily guess why *he* should choose to——"

He stopped abruptly, warned by the flush of anger with which Ruth looked up that he was venturing on dangerous ground; and he added, gravely and coldly,—

"Under the circumstances, Miss Charteris, the only thing to be done is to let the matter drop entirely. Explanations could do nothing but harm."

They had been slowly following Mrs. Powys's chair through the gardens all this time. It was a little in advance of them, and had now reached the road, where it

was waiting for them to come up. Ruth stopped. She was no longer flushed and indignant, but very pale ; and there was a look of pain in her eyes which Stephen could hardly bear to see, as she said, with an effort,—

“Such an insinuation must be explained, Mr. Powys. Tell me, then——”

He interrupted her much more gently than he had spoken before :

“Trust me when I tell you that further explanation is useless, and could only give pain to everybody concerned. Forget the whole thing as soon as you can. I am going off to England this evening, so I shall not be here to remind you of it. I am sorry that my mother knows anything about it, as it will be a disappointment to her, but I will tell her that it has come to nothing, and that she must not think or talk of it any more. As for me, it isn't worth minding. Something else will turn up in time. Forget it all. There is nothing else to be done.”

He had spoken quickly and decidedly, as if determined to prevent her from answering, and had walked on so as to join his mother and Colonel Kennedy before she could interrupt him. Ruth was scarcely aware of how it was all managed ; she felt bewildered and oppressed, and was silent until the two groups had separated and she found herself walking up the Ludwigstrasse with Colonel Kennedy.



CHAPTER XVI.

"WELL, Ruth, have you solved the mystery?" said Colonel Kennedy. "I gave you a fair chance of satisfying your curiosity."

"And I have only increased it!" answered Ruth.

She tried to speak indifferently; but the tone of her voice at once betrayed that something had gone wrong, and Colonel Kennedy looked at her inquiringly.

"I don't understand it yet," she continued. "It has all been managed very strangely."

And then she made a hasty remark on another subject.

"The solution is something not very creditable to that tiresome fellow Barrington," thought Colonel Kennedy to himself. "So much the better, perhaps, if it opens her eyes. He is not half good enough for her. But I am sorry for her, if she is finding it out."

He understood Ruth, now, well enough to know that the truest kindness was to be silent on the subject, unless she were to speak of her own accord, and he therefore responded to her attempt at indifferent conversation. They went to the book-shop, and then they returned home to breakfast, and Ruth forced herself to appear in the same spirits as usual, though it was a hard task to attend to all the small interests of their daily life.

Breakfast was over; Sir Everard was gone to his own room; Colonel Kennedy had settled himself on the balcony with his books and a cigar, and the two sisters were alone in the salon. Ruth was on the point of leaving it, when Agatha spoke.

"You look tired, Ruth. You should not do so much before breakfast. Why did you let yourself be dragged about after that woman's chair? There is nothing so tiring. And it is foolish to let yourself be so entirely monopolized by people of that kind. Very likely they know no one else; but that is no reason for your sacrificing yourself to them so completely."

"I wished to be with them," replied Ruth. "And I don't know why you should speak so slightly of them."

Agatha laughed. "Now, don't be absurd, Ruth, and pretend not to understand me. Of course one would wish to be civil and kind to them,—*quite*: if there is one piece of social stupidity more hopelessly tactless than another, it is that of neglecting or slighting people you happen to know, because they are not exactly in society. You might as well label yourself 'second-rate' at once. The higher your own position, the more small people you are sure to have on hand, and therefore the idea of losing caste by appearing to know any one of that sort who comes in your way is truly absurd. I would always show every necessary courtesy. But that is very different from devoting yourself exclusively to them for the whole morning, especially when——"

"Well," said Ruth, "when especially ought I to leave the friends I prefer for those I wish to avoid?"

"You know quite well what I mean," Agatha replied, with perfect good humor. "You can scarcely think it fair or considerate to have allowed Mr. Allonby to follow you here, and then to treat him as capriciously as you seem inclined to do now."

"I am not responsible for Mr. Allonby's coming here, and I see nothing capricious in showing no pleasure in his society when I feel none."

"My dear Ruth, you cannot pretend that you did not understand why he was always our shadow in London, or that you do not know that he has come here entirely on your account!"

"I never thought about him in London at all," said Ruth, impatiently, "and I never encouraged him to come here. If any one did, it was *you*; and as you have brought him here, Agatha, it is only fair that you should yourself take the trouble of either entertaining him or getting rid of him, as suits you best."

She spoke indignantly, and left the room before her sister could reply.

Colonel Kennedy, who had heard all that was said, now spoke through the open window.

"Agatha!" he called, and, as his wife joined him on the balcony, he said, with some displeasure, "I thought I had told you that I would not have Ruth tormented in that sort of way."

"Oh, it was nothing!" Agatha answered. "I was not really urging her at all; but, of course, no one can ever be got out of one groove into another without some sort of help. There must be a bit of rough intermediate ground; but we shall soon be over it now, I hope, and I don't in the least mind her being rather cross for a little while. I will promise you to be very patient myself, and to keep my own temper, so we shan't really quarrel. Luckily, Douglas Allonby is too well satisfied with himself to perceive how much judicious help he needs."

"Leave Ruth to manage her own affairs, Agatha," said Colonel Kennedy. "I desire that ~~you~~ you will not attempt to influence her in any way. You know how excessively I dislike this sort of worldly match-making; and it is degrading to Ruth to be made the unwilling subject of such vulgar scheming."

"Now, really, my dear Nigel, you are too absurd!" replied Agatha, without the slightest irritation. "What have I done that deserves such ugly words?" The only way to cure Ruth of dreaming about Leonard is to marry her to some one else; and I have done nothing more than give Douglas Allonby the chance of supplanting him if he can. Of course it would have been much the best if Mrs. L'Estrange had given Leonard his proper position at once, and let them marry. Ruth would have kept him out of mischief. But I don't fancy, somehow, that he has much strength of character,—I very much doubt his standing Mrs. L'Estrange's provoking tests, whatever they are,—and though he would be all very well with a good position and fortune secured, I don't think he is at all the sort of man to float a poor ménage against the stream with either dignity or success. There is nothing for it, therefore, but getting Ruth to give it up; and a girl requires some help to free herself from that sort of affair quietly and yet completely."

"True," said Colonel Kennedy, rather dryly. "To be off with the old love and on with the new in a few weeks must need skillful generalship, I can believe."

Agatha laughed.

"Of course I wish Ruth to marry, and to marry well; it would be an utter waste of her life if she did not; and the sooner the better. If she dreams on uselessly about Leonard for two or three years, it will be a great disadvantage to her. In the first place, the story would become perfectly well known, and other people would cease to think of her; and in the second, that sort of indefinite attachment spoils a girl, and is horribly unbecoming. She would lose her youth and her beauty with her spirits; and you cannot wish that."

"Dull, old, and ugly!" said Colonel Kennedy. "Your

imagination is lively, Agatha, if you can conceive that those three adjectives will be likely to apply to Ruth in a year or two, as a punishment for the sin of not marrying Allonby against her will."

"Not against her will, of course," Agatha replied, smiling; "only without a violent fit of romance. I should not wish her to marry *anybody*, just because it might be a good match; but Douglas Allonby is sensible and good and clever. He would be extremely kind and indulgent to her, and if she wants a field for her energies and 'aspirations,' as people call them, she could hardly choose better. There are large estates and lots of tenantry for her to interest herself about; and, as he goes in for all sorts of social questions, she could amuse herself by helping him and brightening up his speeches and papers a little,—and she would have a position which would give her the command of exactly the society she would like. In fact, Nigel, you must admit that, though he may be just a little prosy and self-satisfied and tiresome for a lover, it would not be easy to find any one likely to make a better husband. I don't see why you should call planning this for Ruth's real happiness 'vulgar scheming.' It would be the best thing possible for her in every way: so please don't be tiresome and try to put spokes in the wheel. Why on earth do you want her to keep to her childish fancy for Leonard?"

"I don't!" said Colonel Kennedy, impatiently. "I believe that her love for him is a childish illusion, and I am glad that the delay which Mrs. L'Estrange's decision must cause may save her from sacrificing her life to it. Ruth is worthy of some better fate than either to keep a youth like Barrington 'out of mischief,' as you call it, or to be the wife of a well-meaning prig like Allonby. In either case there could be no free growth for her. 'Vul-

gar,' in your own sense of the word, your schemes may not be; but is it a high view that you take of life or marriage when you own that you are trying to persuade, almost to trick her, into marrying a man for whom she can have no real affection? If you banish all deep feeling, take all the poetry out of life, it is a poor sort of existence that you leave."

"My dear Nigel, how fearfully romantic you are when you do let it break out now and then! Of course a marriage with Douglas Allonby would be rather prosy; but, then, young men with large fortunes, unexceptionable characters, good tempers, good looks, and good manners *and* souls full of poetry—are not to be easily found. It is no use expecting to have everything; and if you must give up something, why, surely the poetry is the least indispensable."

"I doubt it,—*to Ruth*," was the reply. "Anyhow, Agatha, remember I am in earnest in saying that I will have no attempt made to influence her. Let her decide for herself, unpersuaded and unapproached."

He opened his book again as he spoke, and Agatha, merely saying, "Then you will be responsible if she ends her days as the maiden aunt of the family," retreated into the salon. The next moment, however, she came back, to say, "Nigel, when the time arrives for Ethel and Maggie to come out, I shall exercise all my fascinations (if I have any left) on the authorities at the Horse Guards, and get you sent off to India, or somewhere, for a few years, so as to leave myself a clear field to marry them to my satisfaction, unhampered by poetical visions."

"I shall have left the army by that time, and settled down as a Scotch laird," answered Colonel Kennedy, without looking up; and Agatha left him again. He was not, however, destined to pursue his studies without in-

terruption, for a few minutes later Ruth came on to the balcony.

"Nigel, I want you to help me without asking any questions. Mr. Powys starts for England this afternoon. I must see him and speak to him alone before he goes. Will you manage it for me?"

Colonel Kennedy closed his book.

"Certainly I will. When do you wish it to be,—and where? But I need not ask. The sooner the better, of course; and it must be out of doors,—for to see any one alone here anywhere else is impossible. Come out with me, then, and I'll see about it."

Ruth went silently to fetch her hat, and Colonel Kennedy stood for a moment on the balcony.

"Poor child!" he thought. "Illusions must die, no doubt, but sometimes they die hard." Perhaps the sigh that followed the thought was not exclusively caused by sympathy with Ruth's present troubles.

"Take a book down to one of the seats near the Stahl Brunnen," Colonel Kennedy said, as Ruth joined him again. "There is not a quieter place about, at this time of day. I will go and call at their lodgings—Mrs. Powys told me where they were—and send him out to you. I suppose he will understand why you are likely to want to see him?"

"Yes," Ruth answered, gravely. "He will know that all this mystery must be cleared up before I write to Mrs. L'Estrange. You will trust me to manage it my own way, Nigel: afterwards I will tell you what I can,—but please say nothing, even to Agatha, about my having anything to do with it."

He gave the assurance she asked, and the next moment they separated, Colonel Kennedy going towards the English church, near which the Powyses were lodging,

while Ruth walked slowly down the narrow path under the arching acacias to the appointed place by the Stahl Brunnen, and chose a shady seat. She tried hard to resist the conviction that the full explanation which she had determined to insist upon having from Mr. Powys could only be what must give her acute pain. She told herself that it was absurd to suppose it possible that Leonard could really have willfully misrepresented what he had heard. What motive could he have had? She hated herself for the disloyalty which could even allow the idea of doubting his truth and honor, and yet in her heart she knew that she *did* doubt, and that she shrank from the coming interview with Mr. Powys, because she dreaded to hear what must convince her that those doubts were justified. Everything near her was intensely still. The large shady space round the well was perfectly quiet, for no one ever came there at that hour of the day, and the only trace to remind her of the life and stir which had filled the avenues an hour or two ago was the neat, fair-haired Brunnen Mädchen, sitting at her post, but sewing busily, as if not expecting any possible interruption.

The sunlight found its way here and there through the branches of the large acacia-trees as they were moved by a slight breeze, and Ruth watched the dancing spots of light on the ground before her, brilliant one moment and gone the next, and wondered if through life every dream of more than common happiness was to resemble them, and be, in the words Mr. Powys had used in the morning, "just one hope more lighted in order to go out." Then she told herself that it was morbid nonsense to dwell upon such fears, to make herself miserable about such a trifle; no doubt all could easily be explained; Mr. Powys must have received a false impression of whatever were the facts of the case, which Leonard would at once remove.

She wished that he would come ; and yet, when she heard his steps approaching, she felt almost inclined to escape before he saw her, and so avoid hearing what she had sent for him on purpose that he might tell her.

"Colonel Kennedy told me that you wished to speak to me, Miss Charteris, and that I should find you here."

Ruth looked up as he spoke. Hers was one of the natures to which the necessity for speaking or acting never fails to give courage and self-control for the time.

"Thank you for complying so quickly with a request that was perhaps cool from a new acquaintance," she said, courteously. "But I am sure you must feel as I do, that what you said this morning cannot be left unexplained. Will you be kind enough to tell me what you really meant?"

Stephen remained standing by the bench on which she was seated, leaning against the end of it. There was a pause before he spoke. Then he said, quietly,—

"I spoke without thinking, Miss Charteris, in the excitement and surprise of the moment, and I would rather not be asked to explain. Of course I am quite aware that if I do not I must give up all idea of applying for this agency ; but that concerns only myself."

"It is not merely a question of the agency," said Ruth, "for what you *did* say implied too much to be left as it stands. Your words could bear but one meaning ; and it is only common justice to give a chance of such an impression—which must have arisen from some misunderstanding—being removed. I think I have a right to ask you to explain them."

"Even when I tell you that I regret having spoken them?"

"Even then," she answered. "Since they cannot be recalled, they *must* be explained."

"Why should you seek to know what can only give you pain? These people are your relations, are they not?"

"Not in the least,—only old and intimate friends; but that has nothing to do with it. Mr. Powys, nothing could give me greater pain than hints and half-truths. Let me know really what you believe to have happened."

"What *did* happen was, that Mr. Barrington and I met at a supper-party on the evening of the day on which we had both been to Hillyer's chambers. We each knew the other's name, but I did not know that he had any connection with Mrs. L'Estrange, or Throstlethwaite, while he, of course, knew who I was. After what passed that night, I can understand that I was about the last person he would desire should come to be his aunt's agent, if, as you tell me, his succession to the property depends upon her pleasure. It was easy for him, in writing to her the next day, to repeat accurately enough all that he had heard of me, withholding only the fact that he had my address and knew that a letter would reach me quickly. He did this, and there is an end of it."

"Why should he have dreaded your coming?" asked Ruth, quickly; and Stephen, rightly judging that to tell her all was now the truest kindness, answered at once,—

"Because it was not the sort of place at which he would wish it to be known that he had been seen. I am very seldom in London, and I went with a cousin with whom I had been dining, scarcely knowing where he was taking me. The details of it would not interest you. Play—and very high play—seemed to be the object of the meeting. I did not join in it, for I could not have afforded to lose even the most trifling sum; but I looked on, and I saw Mr. Barrington play and lose heavily. From what was said afterwards by my cousin, I gathered that he was not in the habit of playing, and that it was the first time

he had been there. Towards the end of the evening there was a disturbance. One man, a stranger among them, I believe, cheated, and I, being merely a looker-on, detected him, for I had seen the thing done before in the same way. This made me rather prominent for the moment, so that I know my name was known to Mr. Barrington. That is really all, Miss Charteris, and nothing so very bad; but Mr. Barrington might naturally think that if his chance of the property depended on Mrs. L'Es-trange's confidence in him, it would be wiser to keep me at a safe distance from her."

Ruth had listened in silence, and even when Stephen stopped she did not speak. She knew that he was telling her the simple truth without exaggeration, and she felt, with a crushing sense of shame and pain, all the weakness and baseness of Leonard's selfish conduct.

The consciousness of what she was suffering was intolerable to Stephen; the silence oppressed him, and he spoke again:

"You asked for the whole truth, Miss Charteris, and I have obeyed you; but I blame myself for the folly which has led to your knowing it and has made it seem of more importance than it is. It is not the sort of thing that you can know anything about, really,—and I know ladies have a mysterious horror of any form of gambling,—but I speak truly in telling you that I believe in Mr. Barrington's case it was no confirmed habit, but merely an accidental temptation, an experiment, and, after all, one which many if not most men with any money to spare try once, at least. I do not suppose there is any need for anxiety about him: he fortunately did not see its attractive side, and I think left the place thoroughly disgusted."

Ruth looked up now, very pale, but perfectly self-possessed.

"Probably. I am sorry he did it, for he could not afford to play experiments with money any more than you say that you could; but I can believe in his being led on to join in it, meaning no harm. What I cannot conceive is that he could——"

She could not say it.

Stephen, divided between indignant contempt for Leonard and intense pity for her, scarcely knew what to say.

"The temptation was great," he said, at last, gravely. "He must have felt that I had it in my power to destroy Mrs. L'Estrange's trust in him entirely. He knew nothing of me; he naturally disliked the idea of feeling himself at my mercy, as it were; and the stake was a valuable one. Probably he yielded to a momentary impulse when he first wrote, and afterwards it must have seemed impossible to retract."

Ruth could not discuss it; she turned to another branch of the subject.

"At any rate, it can all be explained now," she said. "When Mrs. L'Estrange wrote to me two days ago, she had not even heard of any one whom she wished should fill the place. Judging from what you were told of it, do you believe that you would like it?"

There was something in Ruth's straightforward frankness which seemed to compel frankness in return.

"I am sure that I should," was Stephen's reply; "but I need not therefore have it. Something else will turn up in time, and I would not have troubled waters stirred again on my account. If, as I fancy from all you have said, Mr. Barrington now stands in her son's place to Mrs. L'Estrange, it would be useless cruelty to tell her this. Knowing it, she could hardly help offering me the place, and I could hardly refuse it; but my presence

could only give her pain, and therefore, Miss Charteris, we had better let it rest."

"Frank's memory is more to Mrs. L'Estrange than any one living ever can be," replied Ruth; "and the fact of his having so earnestly desired that you should, if possible, be the one to work with her and help her, would more than counterbalance—— I think she ought to know and decide for herself. It cannot be right that either she or you should suffer for no real reason."

"I don't presume to suppose that she will lose much in not having my services," said Stephen. "At any rate, she will never know they were to be had, and a loss you are unconscious of cannot be very bad to bear. As for me, I shall do well enough as I am till I find something better. I know my mother was inflicting a long story on you this morning,—I was sure of it when I joined you,—but you must take it with large allowance for her weak health and low spirits. She *will* blame herself and try to pose me as a martyr, if she can find any one to listen to her; but we are very happy and comfortable, and might as easily change for the worse as for the better; so I am making no alarming sacrifice."

"Still a change which would double your income, give you really interesting work, and restore you to your proper position in society, must have attractions for you; and it seems to me that for every reason the truth ought to be told," said Ruth, with an effort.

"For every reason but one," was the answer. "Its being told will give *you* pain. That is reason enough for letting it alone. It is not worth thinking about any more. I go to England this afternoon, and shall look out for something else. If you will spare a little time to my mother now and then, it will be a real kindness. As for all this, I am sorry that my stupidity has been the cause

of your knowing it ; but it may rest absolutely between us,—and you, I hope, will soon forget it.”

He spoke quickly and decidedly,—almost brusquely ; and, before Ruth could answer, he simply raised his hat and left her without further farewell.

CHAPTER XVII.

“FORGET it all,” Stephen had said, more than once, and even while she recognized their kind intention, the words echoed in Ruth’s ears like a mockery when he had gone, and she was left alone to realize the full meaning of all that had passed.

Illusions must die,—as Colonel Kennedy had reflected that morning ; with but few exceptions, it is the natural law of their being ; and in proportion to the happiness they have given while they lasted must be the suffering when they come to be extinguished. It is perhaps one of the most painful of the many forms in which the insecurity of all earthly happiness can be brought home to any one, at any age ; while to the quick sensibilities and blind, loving confidence of an inexperienced and warm-hearted girl, there can be no more intolerable torture than the sudden unveiling of the wretched skeleton which is the only reality beneath all the fancied perfections supplied by her own imagination.

At this moment Ruth had to bear such a revelation in all its bitterness. She did not, she could not, doubt the absolute truth of all the facts just told to her, and neither could she differ from the inference which had been drawn from them. She dwelt comparatively little on the main

incident in the story; the loss of even a large sum of money by gambling was nothing in her eyes compared with the rest.

It was foolish and wrong undoubtedly, but she did not believe the practice to be habitual, and it made little impression upon her. What chilled her to the heart was the utter want of strength and courage, of truth and honor, shown in the subsequent concealment. It was cowardly and mean; it was neither manly nor gentlemanly; it was dishonorable by Stephen; it was a betrayal of Mrs. L'Estrange's confidence; and it was cruelly heartless by Frank. The selfish calculation which had prompted the first untruth was revolting, and the moral cowardice which had persisted in it was despicable.

Ruth saw it all, and saw it with a sense of sickening shame and misery. For a long time after Stephen had left her, she sat there perfectly still, conscious only of pain which left her no power to think. She saw, as if she were in a dream, what passed around her. She noticed the little Brunnen Mädchen's bright, happy smile when her uniformed "schatz" made his appearance by the well, for an evidently unexpected and possibly unauthorized interview.

They were out of hearing, but Ruth could see that they were happy together, and as she watched them and recalled all the joy she herself had often felt when with Leonard, all her love and trust, her faith in his goodness, and her confidence in what she had believed to be his high ideal of life, she wondered bitterly whether also to the merry little German girl disenchantment would come in time,—whether life was really only a series of disappointments to every one. How long she had remained there in this unresisted dream of mere pain she could not have told, but approaching steps and voices roused her in an instant, for she

dreaded seeing any one she knew. The sounds, however, were not English, and the next moment a couple of Prussian officers appeared within the shady circle.

As if by magic, the "schatz" at once disappeared, and the girl was at her post without a thought apparently of anything but of filling glasses with bubbling water, if they should be wanted. The incident was trivial, but it served to restore Ruth's half-paralyzed faculties, and, struggling to shake off the depression which had hitherto overpowered her, she began really to think of the position.

Turning from the question of her own relations with Leonard, she faced the consideration of what she ought to do. Even while she admitted the generous kindness of Stephen's offer to let the matter be passed over in silence, she shrank from the recollection of the cold disdain which he could not conceal whenever he alluded to Leonard. He scorned even to resent so despicable an injury! Her own face burned with shame and indignation at the remembrance, and then grew white with the thought that it was left for *her* to decide what was to be the end of it all.

Mr. Powys meant to spare her by his renunciation of all idea of applying for this agency. She was too just not to believe him to be sincere, but she did not see how she could possibly allow him to make the sacrifice; and yet in that case she must herself be the means of bringing not only ruin but disgrace upon Leonard. The idea at first was intolerable. She felt that she could not do it, that it could not possibly be expected of her.

Then her mind went back to that last evening of Frank's life, when she had promised him to do all she could for his mother. If she accepted Mr. Powys's offer of silence, she should be not only sinning against truth and justice but breaking her faith. Her natural sense of

right was too clear to allow her to blind herself for long as to what she ought to do, but to make up her mind to do it was hard. Loving Leonard as she did (and not even her perception of his want of moral strength, though it pained her acutely, could suddenly kill her love for him), how could she deliberately disgrace him, deprive him of everything he valued most in life, and in doing it of course alienate him from herself, while knowing that in his love for her lay the one best chance of his redeeming the past? How could she ever bear to meet Mr. Powys constantly, when as a necessary consequence of his coming to Throstlethwaite Leonard would be banished from it? She almost felt that, however wrong it might be, she must keep silence. Mr. Powys had decidedly refused to act for himself, he had voluntarily and quite sincerely begged her to forget it all, and why should she not accept the offer?

Having reached this point was but to begin the struggle over again. She had not a nature to which it was possible to shut out the truth; and yet the temptation, to choose the wrong, even knowingly, was very great. The consequences of choosing right seemed almost more than she dared to face.

All joy and brightness were gone from the thought of the future; but though her love could never again recover from the shock and be what it had been before, it was still filling her heart; even though it was alloyed with pity and contempt, it was there, and it prompted an attempt at self-deception by suggesting that her first duty was to Leonard, and that in bringing disgrace upon him she would be shutting out every hope of his ever rising to better things. Conscience replied that to share his secret and support him in it would only be to lower herself without raising him, and that the truest devotion

would be to face the worst with him and help him to bear it.

The position was a very hard one, and she remained under the acacia-trees, forgetful of how time was passing, conscious chiefly that whichever way she decided she must be wretched. She was roused to a recollection of other things by Colonel Kennedy coming to look for her, and saying, as he came up to her seat,—

“It is past two o’clock, Ruth, and Agatha is wondering what has become of you, and why you do not come in to have some luncheon.”

Ruth rose quickly.

“I am very sorry,” she said. “I quite forgot the time.”

They walked slowly homewards together. Colonel Kennedy was too much concerned by the signs of suffering in her face and voice to attempt to make conversation, and Ruth was considering what to say to him. The necessity for motion and speech had restored her fully to herself, and she had shaken off instantaneously all the harassing doubts of the past hours. “Truth at all costs,” she kept repeating silently to herself. She saw clearly now that there could be no choice. To tell the truth was the only right course, and it must really be the best for every one, whatever immediate pain it might cause. It must be told,—but to as few people as possible,—to no one, in fact, but to Mrs. L’Estrange; and yet she felt that she must say *something* to her brother-in-law.

“Nigel,” she said, as they reached the door of their lodgings, “have you seen Mr. Powys?”

“Not since I sent him to you.”

“He goes to England this afternoon. He proposed that all this mystery should rest unexplained. Of course that cannot be, and I shall write to Mrs. L’Estrange at

once ; but I want you not to mind my saying no more than that,—not to ask what it all means.”

“I will ask nothing and say nothing,” was the reply. “Only just this. Writing to Mrs. L'Estrange will be a hard task for you,—I cannot pretend not to see as much as that. Now, can I spare you the pain by writing to her myself out of the depths of my ignorance, and letting her inquire, if she cares to know more than I can tell her?”

Ruth was sorely tempted to accept this release from the difficult duty before her. For a moment she hesitated. Then low and slowly came the words,—

“Thank you for thinking of it, but I must write myself; the truth must be told, let it be ever so hard to tell.”

And then she went on up the stairs and entered the salon.

“I am sorry that I forgot what o'clock it was,” she said, in apology, to Agatha and to Sir Everard. “But I don't want any luncheon ; it is too hot to eat. I will go and take my hat off.”

Almost as she spoke she left the room again, and went to her own. She felt that she could not stay and talk unconcernedly about all the trifles of the day.

Her bedroom was a small one, and the afternoon sun beat fiercely upon it, even though the Venetian shutters were closed. It was dark and hot and stifling, and as bare of comfortable furniture as the bedrooms of lodging-houses at German watering-places are apt to be ; but solitude was the one thing which Ruth felt she must have, even at the price of physical comfort, and she remained there.

An hour later, Agatha entered the room. Ruth was lying on her bed, but evidently was not asleep, for she spoke as her sister opened the door.

"My dearest Ruth!" Agatha exclaimed. "I was afraid you had a headache when you came in; but this little oven of a place will only make it worse! Sir Everard and Nigel are both out, so do come to the sofa in the sitting-room, which is quite cool, and rest there till it is time to dress."

Ruth had risen while her sister spoke, and was now standing by the glass, arranging her disordered hair as well as the dim light allowed.

"My headache is nothing, thanks," she said; "but I will come to the cooler room now. I was coming, at any rate, to tell you that I am not going with you this afternoon."

A party had been arranged to drive over to Frankfort and dine in the Palm Gardens there; and they were to start at half-past four. Ruth was sure that her present refusal to go would be the signal for a wearisome argument with Agatha.

"Oh! your head will be all the better for the long drive in the cool evening," said Agatha. "If you keep quite quiet for the next hour, you will be well enough to go, I hope."

"I am well enough now," was Ruth's reply. "I don't care to shelter myself behind false excuses, Agatha. I am tired and my head aches, and I shall be glad to stay at home alone and write some letters quietly; but my real reason for not going is that, after what you said this morning, I will join no more parties to be thrown upon Mr. Allonby as I was yesterday evening. I will make it clear that I, at any rate, had nothing to do with his being encouraged to follow us here."

The sisters were now in the sitting-room together, and each was fully determined to carry her point. As Colonel Kennedy was safe in the reading-room at the Kursaal,

Agatha had no hesitation whatever in ignoring his injunctions to leave Ruth alone to decide for herself; but she had far too much tact to attempt either to insist or openly to persuade. She answered at once,—

“You are quite mistaken, Ruth, if you think that I do not know that his coming here now is injudicious and premature. But it is absurd to expect that a man in these matters will go exactly the pace you choose; and even if it is sooner than you like to have to decide, he has a perfect right to a hearing, while nothing can be easier than for you to require to have time to consider the matter, and so forth, if you really cannot make up your mind to settle it at once and get it over.”

Feeling that anything would be more endurable than a long discussion of such a question, Ruth went straight to the point at once.

“The last thing I want, Agatha, is time to consider. I know my own mind perfectly well, and I am neither to be cheated into unintentionally involving myself in a difficulty, nor persuaded into doing it voluntarily. If you dislike my abrupt way of putting a stop to the thing at once, I cannot help it. It is your own fault. You had no right to encourage him to come here,—if it is for me that he comes,—when you knew all the time that it was impossible I should ever care about him.”

Agatha raised her eyes from her lace-work, quite unruffled.

“My dear child, don’t excite yourself so dreadfully about it! You have it in your own power to decide exactly as you please, whenever you choose; but you need not be so indignant with my poor little attempts to give you the opportunity of making a marriage so obviously likely to insure your happiness. What could be better for you both? But, having had the chance, if you choose to

reject it I have nothing more to say. I confess I did hope that you might be induced now to give up a foolish dream and prefer a fate which offers you a prospect of real happiness ; and I own that I still wish you not to decide hastily, when probably a very little time would enable you to——”

Ruth interrupted her.

“Agatha, I hate to hear you talk in that way. You smother it in gentle, plausible phrases, but you mean that you thought it possible that I might be persuaded into marrying a man I did not care for more easily just now than at any other time, and therefore you brought him here ; and I say that it was cruel to him and insulting to me.”

“Not at all. I only hoped that you might see the folly of encouraging yourself in wasting your life on a mere fancy ; and that, giving up the girlish nonsense of an ideal marriage (they never turn out well, even if they do come off !), you might accept a position which you are admirably fitted to fill, and which has scarcely a single drawback. Granted that Mr. Allonby is no hero of romance, by no means your ideal, you are so much the safer from finding out too late that you have made a fool of yourself ; and you need have no qualms of conscience as to not giving him what he would not know how to deal with. A passionate attachment would altogether puzzle him ! He is a good, sensible man, who would be kind and affectionate and liberal ; he would be easily made as happy as he wants to be, and you would have a sphere of life exactly suited to you ; you would have just the sort of duties and responsibilities which would be the most interesting to you, and the sort of pleasures you would most enjoy. It is exactly the marriage which I should imagine possible and desirable for you now. But if you

despise the happiness it offers, and still prefer dreaming of a shadow to grasping a reality, of course I cannot help it. For my own part, I have no faith in ideals. People think them mighty giants for a time, but generally find that they sink into remarkably insignificant pigmies as soon as they are tried in daily life, where common sense reigns instead of imagination! However, it is your own affair. I don't want to tease you, though I *do* desire your happiness. Don't go to Frankfort, if you dislike it; though, of course, staying at home under plea of a headache will not really cut the knot of the dilemma. If Mr. Allonby means to speak now, he will do it before he goes away, somehow."

Agatha had said her say, and Ruth had stood there and listened to her rather long speech without protest or interruption. That, at any rate, was something gained; and Agatha, without leaving time for any answer, rose from her seat and laid down her work. Stopping as she passed to bestow an affectionate caress on her sister, to which Ruth passively submitted, she went to her own room, saying,—

"Well, I, at any rate, must think of dressing."

With a gesture and sigh of unspeakable weariness, Ruth let herself drop into a chair by the open window, and, clasping her hands upon the sill, laid her head upon them. Agatha's instincts had rarely guided her more serviceably than when they dictated all that she had said so quietly, and she could not have given herself a better chance of victory. Ruth might really estimate her sister's theories at their true worth, but in her present state of mind every sentence had told, and she perceived, for the first time, that there *might* be a temptation even in such an escape from her present wretchedness.

Agatha had very skillfully sketched the life offered to her from the side which was most likely to attract her.

If she were to determine to marry Mr. Allonby, she should not only free herself at once from all the complicated anxieties and wearing pain otherwise in store for her, but she should be throwing herself into a life full of movement and interest,—one which she could so fill with occupations and duties as to leave herself no time to think. The temptation was not, however, one that could do more than pass through her mind, to be instantly rejected with a shudder of repulsion at the thought that she could ever have admitted it, even for a moment, as a possibility. Let life be ever so hard, she would never degrade herself by a marriage from any other motive than real affection.

The thought passed absolutely from her mind; but it had served to bring out even more vividly her present suffering, and she felt keenly Agatha's worldly-wise comments upon "ideals" and their usual fate. She had never been in the habit of talking much to any one about her own ideas of love and marriage; but, like all girls, she had had very distinct views of her own on the subject, and they had been what Agatha would have called "high-flown and romantic and utterly unpractical."

The rapidity with which many of her friends went through one love-affair after another, "getting over" a disappointment and marrying some other person within a few weeks or months, had always filled her with contemptuous indignation. Her conception of the sort of affection which alone could justify marriage, or make it possible, had been of a feeling stronger and deeper than any other, about which there could be no mistake, and which must fill the whole being with all the resistless force of an Atlantic tide-wave,—a feeling which might or might not have to be struggled against, and might even have to be suppressed and silenced, but which certainly could not have another similar affair just precede or just follow it; which

might take years, or might need only days, to grow, but which it *must* take more than days or weeks to kill!

Her dream had been of an affection intense and unselfish, of a sympathy so perfect that even the inevitable differences of two natures should serve only to widen the sphere for both. She had believed this best of all earthly blessings to have fallen to her lot, and she had prized it with a gratitude beyond words.

One or two tiny "rifts within the lute" had undoubtedly shown themselves within the last few weeks, but they had been so tiny that she had closed her eyes to them for the time, though now, when the truth was suddenly revealed to her, they recurred vividly to her mind. She tried to picture to herself what sort of future could be in store for her with Leonard, when all the reverence was thus rudely taken from her affection for him; and she shrank from the thought of ever becoming the wife of a man whom even for a moment she had despised,—of whose conduct she could only say in her heart, "It is base." Then she hated herself for thus harshly judging him for having once yielded to temptation,—a temptation, too, prompted probably in great measure by his eager desire to have a position to offer to her,—and of which she could estimate the strength by the almost irresistible impulse she had herself felt only an hour or two ago to fall into the same error, and, for the sake of her own happiness, basely to hold back the truth which it was her duty to tell.

Affection and pity conquered every other feeling when she thought of the shame which her words must bring upon him; and she resolved that if he did not himself break with her in anger, she would be faithful and true to him as if she had been already his wife, and would throw all her power into helping him to rise above this wretched mistake in his life, and to bear the consequences of his

failure bravely, with a firm resolution to fall back no more.

It would be a different life from that of her girlish dreams,—one full of weariness and pain,—for Leonard must have much of humiliation and disappointment to suffer, and her instinct told her that he would bear neither patiently; but she loved him too well not to try to believe that he had only weakly yielded to a momentary strong temptation and had then failed in courage to confess the untruth. She thought that the natural inevitable keen regret and self-reproach afterwards might well account for his uncertain moods lately, and that the present discovery would really relieve him from a painfully false position, which must have been secretly intolerable to him.

When it came near the time for the rest of the party to set off, Ruth retreated to her own room again, to escape from questions and persuasions.

Agatha looked in for a moment, to beg that she would take care of herself, and remember that she had eaten nothing since breakfast. She said she had given full directions to insure her having everything she could want, and in five minutes more they were gone, and Ruth thankfully realized that she should have the whole evening to herself in undisturbed solitude.

She was a good deal exhausted by all the emotions of the day, and her headache was by this time no fiction; but after an hour's sleep on the sofa of the cool, silent salon, she was able to take her dinner when it was brought to her, and then went into the fresh air on the balcony to nerve herself to the task before her.

She had made up her mind what to do, but it was not easy to begin. At length, however, she went in and got her writing-case. She wrote first to Mrs. L'Estrange, a short note, merely telling her of the meeting with Stephen

Powys, and of his being still available if she felt inclined to put herself in communication with him. She added a few words of favorable comment, and ended by saying,—

“There seems to have been some mistake in the report of his engagements when you inquired about him in the spring, which I hope Leonard may now be able to explain. I only write to tell you the fact, and to give you Mr. Powys’s address in Devonshire, where a letter will find him now, as he started for England this afternoon.”

Ruth wrote thus because she had finally decided on referring Mrs. L’Estrange to Leonard for an explanation, and so putting him in the best position that was possible, by enabling him to make an apparently voluntary confession. She felt that it would very much lessen the subsequent pain and humiliation of it all if Mrs. L’Estrange could be kept in ignorance of the fact that Mr. Powys had spoken, and could believe the real truth to be known only to herself by Leonard’s own avowal of it.

This course seemed to Ruth by far the best for everybody; but though it might be the least painful of the two in the end, and the most likely to produce a good result, it was unquestionably the most difficult at the moment, for it involved a letter to Leonard himself which it was very hard to write. *He* must know all that had passed, and then Ruth could only hope that he would do all that could be done to atone for the past by perfect frankness now, and by patient endurance of whatever well-deserved humiliation might be his punishment.

It was a letter written at the cost of much thought, and not a few tears.

“MY DEAR LEONARD,—

“You will be surprised to see a letter from me, and at first you will be pleased, but when you have read it I

know that it can only give you pain. That it costs me fully as much to write it, is so simply true that I scarcely feel that I need say so ; you could not know me at all and not believe that it must be so. I will say what I have to say as shortly as I can. The day before yesterday we met Mr. Powys (Frank's friend), who is here with his mother. An accident made me acquainted with her. I recognized him as the gentleman whom I met by the lake that afternoon in April, and I soon learned their name.

"I need not repeat in detail how I found out that Mr. Powys, though he had heard from Mr. Hillyer of Mrs. L'Estrange's inquiries about him, could explain as little as I could how it was that nothing had come of them : he had merely supposed that she had preferred some one else, for he had received an impression that your name was L'Estrange. The moment I mentioned your real name, his surprise, and a few hasty words, showed that he then believed himself to understand it all.

"He would have drawn back and kept silence, but, for every reason, that could not be. I insisted on having a full explanation, and it was given, and I *cannot* disbelieve it. Mr. Powys gave it reluctantly and very generously, making as little of it as was possible,—admitting that under the circumstances the temptation to suppress him must have been great, and that, having once hastily yielded to it, you might feel it almost impossible to retract what you had said. He refused to make any application himself to Mrs. L'Estrange now, and urged me to be entirely silent about him, as he did not wish to 'have troubled waters stirred again on his account.'

"I have not seen him since he left me after saying this ; and he is gone back to his work in Devonshire, determined to make no move in the matter. But that cannot possibly be allowed by us. I could not accept for you a sacrifice

so humiliating, and I could not feel myself justified in concealing the truth. The temptation to do it was great, and it has cost me much to resolve on doing right, but I am sure that you will really be glad that I have forced myself to speak.

“From the very strength of the temptation I have felt to be silent now myself, I can understand how it might be possible for you, in the excitement of the first moment, to write as you wrote; and, once done, to undo it would have been too terrible a humiliation to be easily incurred voluntarily; but I know now why you have seemed so oppressed and anxious ever since; it must have been almost more than you could bear to keep such a secret, even though you felt confession of it to be beyond your strength; and I am sure you will really rejoice that this accident makes further silence impossible, and forces you to tell the truth to Mrs. L'Estrange and to do justice to Mr. Powys.

“I have written to her by this post; but I have said only that I find Mr. Powys is still free, and have referred her to you for all further explanation. It will come best from yourself, and—I *could* not write it. It grieves me to the heart to think of the pain and shame before you, but yet I feel sure that you must really welcome the chance of braving both for the sake of truth; and whatever the consequences of the full confession which must now be made to Mrs. L'Estrange, surely *together* we may bear them without difficulty?

“There could have been no true happiness for us in a prosperity bought at the cost of honor and truth; but when we have nothing with which to reproach ourselves, there will be very little need to dread even poverty and hard work.

“Write to me once,—and soon. I know you will feel

that I have done right,—that, indeed, I could not have done otherwise for you any more than for myself; but I should like you to say it. Of course Mrs. L'Estrange need never know that I have any knowledge of it all.

“Ever yours,

“RUTH CHARTERIS.

“P.S.—I write to Mr. Powys to tell him that I cannot accept his generous offer of silence, either for you or for myself, and that I have written to Mrs. L'Estrange to mention my meeting with him, referring her to you for all explanation. I say, also, that I have written *fully* to you.”

The tumult of conflicting feelings in her heart had seemed to make all expression of it impossible, and Ruth was thoroughly dissatisfied with her letter. It appeared so poor and cold, conveying neither her true sense of the position in which he had placed himself, nor even much warmth of sympathy for his present suffering, and yet she could not make it better. She had too many brothers and cousins, too much experience of young men as they showed themselves in family relationships, not to know that the one thing above all others to be avoided was the slightest possibility of being felt “a bore.” She must say as little as she could. She must avoid the shadow of an assumption of speaking from a higher point, or of appearing to dictate, while her own taste and instinct revolted from the common feminine resources of either “preachiness” or an appeal to his feeling for herself personally. Meagre and bald as it was, the letter must go and take its chance. She would not doubt either his affection or his generosity, so as to fear that he would resent what she had done, or misunderstand her in any way.

She wrote her short note to Mr. Powys ; she posted all three letters herself ; and, being by that time too much worn out to face the others on their return home, she went to bed soon after nine, tired enough to insure sleep.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE next few days passed uneventfully enough. Ruth had made up her mind that she should have to undergo the disagreeable interview with Mr. Allonby which Agatha seemed to consider inevitable, and was proportionately pleased when he left Homburg on the day after the dinner at Frankfort, without either making any unwelcome demonstration towards her, or appearing to have taken offense. She saw him in the morning ; but, though he did not molest her in any way, neither did he avoid her, and he took leave of her in a quiet, friendly manner which quite reassured her. She wondered for a moment whether Agatha's hopes had not been built on a very slight foundation, and whether her own vanity had not made her take alarm without much reason. It must either have been so, or else he had taken the hint which her manner had been intended to convey with greater quickness than she should have thought probable, and had responded to it with more tact and delicacy than she had given him credit for possessing.

Be this as it might, he was gone, and that was one trouble over. She did not suspect that Agatha, determined that she should do nothing so absurd and irrational as to refuse him positively, had indulged in a little private

and delicate manœuvring, and had contrived to make him understand that though, of course, all the childish nonsense about Leonard Barrington, which had been county gossip, was a thing of the past, her sister was scarcely yet quite prepared to enter upon a definite engagement with any one else.

Agatha had hinted and suggested, with apparently the warmest sisterly interest in his ultimate success, and had counseled patience and a temporary withdrawal as certain to change Ruth's present strong feeling of friendship and esteem and admiration into the sort of affection which he desired. It was done gracefully and skillfully, and Agatha triumphed in her success in thus quickly getting rid of him now, when his failure was certain, and yet retaining him as an acknowledged lover, almost pledged to come forward again at some future time. Ruth must learn common sense by degrees, she thought, and she enjoyed the consciousness of what her indignation would have been had she only suspected that diplomatic conversation in the Frankfort gardens. How Nigel, too, would have snubbed her little manœuvre in the bud, if he had but known of it! How grateful they ought to be to her for thus ignoring their fancies and so prevent Ruth from throwing away finally such a brilliant prospect as if it were utter valueless, and then of course repenting too late! Nothing of all this, however, transpired; and Ruth, thankful to be spared all further allusion to Mr. Allonby, did her best to conceal the weariness and anxiety which oppressed her, and tried to throw herself heartily into her sister's amusements, as well as into Colonel Kennedy's interests.

She saw a good deal of Mrs. Powys, to whom her companionship was a real boon, and whom she cordially liked, in spite of something of weakness, both of nerves and understanding, which a little lessened the great attraction

of her warmth of heart and graceful manners. Ruth could not help being rather amused by the almost child-like obedience with which Mrs. Powys complied with what had evidently been her son's request before leaving her; for, while she talked a great deal about all the past years, and dwelt with a grateful, loving appreciation on his patience and courage under difficulties, and his unwearied devotion to herself, she never once spoke of the Throstlethwaite agency and her disappointment about it, or of the future in any way.

The days passed on, and Ruth felt that answers must soon come to her letters. She had calculated that they would be received on the Saturday, or possibly the Sunday, after she wrote, and therefore she had addressed both to Throstlethwaite.

In the middle of the week the answers came, one from Mrs. L'Estrange, and one from Leonard, and they were put into her hands just as she was leaving the house in the afternoon to go with Agatha to hear the band play in the gardens.

"Oh, don't dawdle, Ruth," Agatha said, as her sister seemed inclined to turn back and go in again. "Never mind your letters for a minute. Bring them with you, and read them in the garden. If we go up too late, it is so troublesome to find chairs."

It was almost a relief for the moment not to be able to open them, and Ruth complied with the request. They went out and joined a group of friends, and, Agatha being thus provided with amusement, Ruth drew her chair a little apart from the circle of gossiping, lace-making ladies, and, keeping her sunshade between them and herself, ventured to open and read her letters. With a perhaps natural cowardice, she took Mrs. L'Estrange's first. It was short, and written in haste, thanking her

warmly for her information about Mr. Powys, upon which Mrs. L'Estrange said she had at once acted.

"I have telegraphed to him that I have heard from you, and that I hope he will come down at once and see me and the place, after which we can mutually judge what we wish to do. Of course I shall pay all his expenses, and we are neither of us pledged to anything, but from what you say I am very sanguine. Leonard and Mr. Hillyer seem to have been equally hazy and unbusiness-like in their hasty assumption of his having gone to America; but L. is very sorry for his share in the mistake, whatever it was, and there is no use in making much of it now. An answer, just come from Mr. Powys. He will be here the day after to-morrow. I will write to you when his visit is over."

A sentence or two of local news completed the letter, and Ruth, in bewildered dismay, turned to Leonard's, to read his explanation.

"MY DEAR RUTH,—

"You seem so anxious to know that you have done no harm, that I will not lose another post in telling you that it is all right; and, as it has turned out, I am very glad indeed that you were Quixotic enough to risk the possible consequences of such a step. You do me only justice in supposing that I have been thoroughly vexed with myself ever since, for my folly that time in London. It was folly to go near such a place at all, and worse folly still to lose my head and play rashly and so double my debts, instead of, as I had hoped, winning enough to pay off that Hom-burg fellow at once. I had to borrow to pay what I lost that evening, and only got it so easily because I was sup-

posed sure of Throstlethwaite,—as I knew well enough. I don't suppose you can conceive the state of mind I was in altogether, that night. I felt myself to be absolutely in Mr. Powys's power, if I were to let him come down, but I saw that he did not know anything about me then, and, in the half-mad state I was in, I wrote off at once to Aunt Margaret such a letter as I knew would keep him out of my way. Of course I don't defend it for a moment; but I was past thinking coolly at the time, and the letter once posted could not possibly be recalled, so there was nothing for it but sticking to it.

“It *was* an awfully strong temptation; for my hopes of Throstlethwaite seemed to hang by a thread, and to lose it meant to lose everything most precious to me. It was indefensible,—I admit it,—and it was also utterly unnecessary. If I had been in full possession of my senses, I might have known that, for his own sake, Powys was sure to hold his tongue. To have it known that he had been involved in a gambling row, would not have advanced his interests any more than mine. I have regretted scores of times that I did not go to him quietly before writing to Aunt Margaret at all; for we could have settled the matter comfortably in a few words, since our interests were identical; but I was unnerved by the whole thing, and acted like an idiot.

“I am all the more glad that your meeting him now enables us to get it set straight quietly, because if he had not detected the fellow who cheated, I should have been a much heavier loser than I was. As for raking up all the details now, and making wholly uncalled-for confessions to Aunt Margaret,—as your ignorance of the world makes you suggest,—it would be simply absurd. It is very lucky that you trusted it all to me, for it is far better both for Powys and myself that she should know nothing about it.

Elderly ladies of large property are not given to approving of their agents frequenting gambling-clubs, any more than their heirs; and 'Much ado about nothing' is a very general feminine motto on these occasions,—for, after all, an accidental visit never likely to be repeated was no such heinous offense in either of us, though it would doubtless be thought so.

"I shall never play again: of that you may be quite sure. I had a very sufficient warning. I have accepted full blame for careless muddling of Hillyer's report of Powys's engagements, and Aunt M. has duly held forth on the evils of inaccuracy in business, and all is smooth. She has telegraphed to Powys to come down to see her, and I have written him a note which he will receive before he comes. It will put everything straight between us, and make it all quite plain sailing for him. So you see your conscience, however sensitive, may be quite easy about the whole concern: full justice is done to him, and *we* take no harm, while Aunt M. is spared all bother and annoyance.

"For your readiness to face trouble and poverty and all sorts of horrors for me and with me, I can never thank you enough; you know what such assurances are to me,—though you have always so stringently forbidden me to dwell upon it, or to speak out all my love for you until my time of trial is over, that I dare not say much. Things are going splendidly for us, so far; and, though this has been an awfully close shave, still 'all's well that ends well,' and now there is nothing to fear. In a much shorter time than either of us thought possible that day on Friar's Fell, I hope everything will be happily settled, and that I shall be able to claim you openly.

"Ever yours,

"L. B."

Ruth had believed herself to be prepared for Leonard's answer to her letter, whatever it might be. She had sometimes feared that he would be angry and bitter and vehemently reproachful; more often she had fancied him quite overpowered by all the pain and shame of such a discovery, but, even while suffering acutely, trying generously to show that he did not resent her interference.

She had thought of all the forms that regret and mortification and disappointment might possibly take, and would have been as ready to be patient under unreasonable anger, if necessary, as to cheer and console him in all the misery of self-abasement, or to encourage him to bear the consequences of confession with courage and dignity and a resolution to rise above them; but *this* way of treating the matter took her quite by surprise. She felt utterly bewildered, and almost inclined to think that she must have been dreaming and allowing her imagination to magnify and distort the real facts of the case, if it could be possible for him to answer her so lightly.

His cool assumption of masculine superiority of judgment in the matter, his easy ridicule of her "sensitive conscience," his insinuation that women always made "much ado about nothing," and his apparently unhesitating decision that silence as to the past was the only right course now, made her wonder for the moment whether she had indeed been utterly mistaken in the view she had taken of the affair.

Leonard's conduct had seemed to her untruthful and dishonest, cowardly and selfish, so absolutely unworthy of any man of honor that it had been almost more than she could bear to have to tell him that it was known to her; and now he answered lightly,—speaking of it all as "folly," owning merely that he had "acted like an idiot," and treating the idea of "a wholly uncalled-for

confession" as if it could only have occurred to an ignorant, inexperienced girl to suggest anything so ridiculous !

It had been a "close shave," but the danger was past, and his spirits could rise at once in the anticipation of the future. Could it possibly have been so if the facts were really what she had been led to believe them? There surely must have been something very different ; in writing to him she had not entered into the details of the story ; she had assumed his knowledge of what had become known to her ; some explanation *must* be possible which would place it all in a different light, or he could never have answered her in this way !

Then there came back upon her mind every word Mr. Powys had spoken, and every look and tone ; and the more she thought of it all, the less possibility of disbelief could she see. Her cheeks burned again at the recollection of the contempt for Leonard which he would not express but could not conceal. She could not but see that Leonard himself admitted all the facts to be the same, that he acknowledged himself to have been influenced by the same motives as those imputed to him ; and she realized slowly but certainly that the only difference was in the feelings with which he regarded it all.

He could write with careless levity of what had cost her hours of shame and pain, and more bitter tears than any she had ever shed. The full confession which would have seemed to her the only hope of recovering peace of mind and self-respect was in his eyes "simply absurd." He had staved off the necessity for it by a further fencing with truth, and then reconciled it to his conscience by declaring it to be as much for Mr. Powys's advantage as his own.

With thoughts like these haunting her mind and chilling her heart, Ruth hated the bustle and publicity of

watering-place life, and longed for the power of seeking solitude by the shore of Brideswater or on the slopes of Friar's Fell. All through that afternoon and evening she endured the crowd and noise and forced herself to talk and laugh with their many friends, wondering vaguely whether their ready smiles and lively words concealed such aching misery as hers. Gay society was torture, but when night at last brought solitude it was scarcely more endurable.

As far as the present was concerned, she could do nothing more; she felt that she had done her part, and that she was not called upon to interfere further. The injustice done to Mr. Powys was as effectually canceled as if Leonard had told his aunt all the truth; and his services were secured to her, as Frank had wished.

As far as the actual facts went, nothing would be left to be desired; it would all be exactly the same as if Leonard had done what she wished and hoped. And yet how different! Even if this day's letters had told her that Mrs. L'Estrange had withdrawn all hopes of Leonard's ever succeeding to Throstlethwaite, Ruth felt that she should have been comparatively happy, and without any wish to retract the promise which she had made of standing by him *whatever* the consequences of his confession. The generous impulse which had made her associate herself to a certain extent in his disgrace by telling him that she had felt the same temptation, and assure him that they "need not fear poverty *together*," would then never have been regretted. Their life might not have been quite the ideal life of her previous dreams, but she would have thrown herself into it with all the courage and energy and unselfish warmth of her nature, and would have been ready to help him to struggle upwards and onwards in whatever line he had chosen.

Now, the future seemed very dark to her, and she found it hard either to understand herself or to make up her mind what to do. Had her love for Leonard been only the ordinary "falling in love" of a girl with some pleasant acquaintance in the course of a few weeks, it would now at once have ceased to be,—not without pain, but without doubt,—and she would have ended the engagement promptly and unhesitatingly.

But in this case, quite apart from all more recent feelings, there was the strong affection which had begun almost in their infancy, and *would* make itself heard. Ever since she could remember, every thought and pleasure had been associated with Leonard; all the amusements of her childhood and girlhood had been enhanced by being shared with him; in all the delightful enjoyments of conscious growth of mind and expanding interests, his sympathy and help and approbation had been unfailing, or had seemed so to her, for she had never discovered until now that she had always given infinitely more than she had received. The very pain she felt now seemed only to make her more clearly aware of how dear he had always been to her; and she could not make up her mind to estrange herself from him completely, while yet she realized that all her happiness in looking forward to a life to be spent with him was gone from her. It was useless to dwell upon it, she knew, but she could think of nothing else, although there was nothing to be done but to wait and see what course it would be right to take.

She quickly decided not to write to him again now, for that would only involve her in a correspondence as fruitless as it would be painful. She must wait till she was at home again, and meanwhile bear it all as best she might. She should be better able to judge of how it must end after she had seen and spoken to him. And when the

morning came after a sleepless night, this was the only result of all the long hours of misery and thought.

The next day's post brought her a note from Mr. Powys,—almost as short as a note could be. He thanked her for writing to him, and for having acted on his behalf. He said that he was just starting for Throstlethwaite, and added that he had had a note from Mr. Barrington, making it quite clear how it was all to be arranged, so that there would be no difficulty on that score ; and that was all.

Ruth longed to know how Leonard had written,—what he had said. Nothing was to be gathered from the concise reticence of Mr. Powys's style ; yet Ruth fancied that she read in it the same cold disdain of Leonard's conduct as had been shown by his way of speaking of him ; and there was a sharp sting in the thought.

Two days more passed, and then came a letter from Mrs. L'Estrange, with a full report of Mr. Powys's visit. She spoke highly of him, and seemed quite convinced that he was the man she wanted ; though she added,—

“It remains to be seen how we shall work together, for we both have strong opinions and strong wills, I think, and a tendency to speak out pretty plainly. I fancy, however, that we are both rational enough to agree to differ amicably, if we differ at all. He is gone back to Devonshire, now, to make arrangements for letting his farm as soon as possible, and giving up his various bits of work there, while I put Kester's Hill Manor House into as habitable a condition as I can at present for him and his mother. He makes no difficulties about going there,—likes it, I think,—and is so frank and *direct* about business of all kinds that I feel sure he will do his part well.

“I know you will be glad to hear that hitherto Leonard has been helping me most efficiently in many ways. I have every reason, so far, to be entirely content with him ;

and when Mr. Powys's arrival releases him from his work for me, he will have fairly earned a payment which will make a considerable difference to the labor before him. He has consulted me about his scheme of making money by writing (which he says he spoke of to you), and I think it may answer well enough. As a rule, I do not approve of young people with nothing of any real worth to say, but with a mere knack of stringing tolerably effective sentences together, swamping the world with second-hand ideas and second-rate literary work; but in this case L. is justified in making money in any honest way open to him, and I think he may produce—not anything really original or good, but something very fairly salable. At any rate, I can help him by getting him an introduction to one or two editors which will insure him a trial; and, under the circumstances, we must wish him success. I believe I am nearly as anxious for the time to be over as he is himself.”

Ruth understood this perfectly; but, whereas a few days ago it would have given her intense pleasure, it now oppressed her painfully.

Hitherto she had said nothing about Mr. Powys to any one, but now she thought it necessary to speak of his going to Throstlethwaite, and she told the facts slightly to Agatha at breakfast, carefully avoiding any details that could excite her suspicion of there being anything odd about the matter. She felt a wish to say a little more to Colonel Kennedy, for she knew that she could trust him to ask no more than she voluntarily told him, and never to allude to it again. He had helped her so readily, and had been so kindly silent, that he seemed to have almost a right to something of an explanation. She went to him when he was as usual sitting over his books during the morning.

“Nigel,” she said, “half confidences are stupid, worth-

less things, generally, but I should rather like *you* to know something about all this. There is nothing in either of these letters which I may not show you, if you don't mind reading them, but you will easily understand that I cannot fill up the gaps."

She gave him Mr. Powys's note and Mrs. L'Estrange's first letter as she spoke, adding,—

"The result of his going to Throstlethwaite you heard this morning."

Colonel Kennedy read the letters and returned them to her.

"Then, as far as the external world is concerned," he said, "the threatened storm has blown over and leaves no traces?"

"Exactly," was all Ruth's reply.

"And for that I care very little," Colonel Kennedy continued. "Probably it is best as it is. You cannot fill up the gaps, as you say, Ruth, and I have no wish that you should; but of course I can guess the sort of thing that has been trying you so sharply during these last few days, sufficiently to have a strong opinion about it. After this moment we will never allude to it again, but I must say one thing to you. Let your judgment and conscience have fair play in the matter, unwarped by any sentimental theories of unselfish, self-sacrificing devotion, and indulge in no misguided hopes of ever doing good by well-meant folly of that kind. Your first duty is to make the real best of yourself; and if you think that precept sounds hard and cold, console yourself by the thought that the idea of ever making a better job of another life by making a bad one of your own, is of all fallacies the most hopelessly foolish. Don't make an irretrievable false step, if you can help it, Ruth. There are few things that I should be more sorry for."

He took up his book again; as a sign that he expected no answer; but before she left him Ruth said, through her tears,—

“I know you are right in theory, but only time can show me what I really ought to do.”

The fact of Mr. Powys becoming Mrs. L'Estrange's agent was not especially interesting to Agatha, and not at all so to any of their acquaintance in Homburg, so that after these few words from Colonel Kennedy Ruth was spared all allusion to the subject, except from Mrs. Powys, who, having at length heard from Stephen, was naturally full of it. She was, however, quite unconscious of any complications, and thought of it entirely as it concerned her son, so that it was not difficult to talk to her about it.

She showed Ruth Stephen's letter, written from Throstlethwaite. It was interesting to her to see it, and when she had read it she felt that she liked it. He described the place and people rather fully, and decidedly well, showing a real appreciation of Mrs. L'Estrange, and a readiness to interest himself in all that would henceforward form part of his work. He entered into all the details of salary and house, and explained what he proposed to do on his return home, so as to effect the move while his mother was in Germany and away from the fuss and fatigue. Of Leonard there was no mention whatever.

“It makes me almost childishly happy,” said Mrs. Powys, as Ruth returned the letter to her.

“You are really not afraid of the uprooting and the change to our north country?” said Ruth, with a smile. “I should have thought you would have expected to feel yourself banished from civilized regions.”

“I am not so silly,” replied Mrs. Powys; “but I should mind *nothing* for the sake of seeing Stephen more prosperous. This is such a capital opening for him in every way.

It has been intolerable to me lately to think of him at his present age, after years of hard work of the dullest kind, still exactly where he was when he began, and without any apparent prospect of ever doing more than waste his life in just earning our daily bread. Ever since I realized it, it has been a constant grief to me. It will all be better now. But still those seven wasted years will haunt me as long as I live."

"They need not," exclaimed Ruth, with sudden vehemence. "Dear Mrs. Powys, what *does* it matter how poor people are, or how hard they work, or what sort of work it is their fate to have to do, so long as they do it nobly and well? It isn't their place in life, but what they make of it,—what they are themselves,—that is everything to those who love them."

Mrs. Powys looked a little surprised.

"True, and I would not have Stephen himself changed for any prosperity that could come to him; but it is equally impossible not to wish for every sort of good fortune for any one you love, and not to regret that they should have to labor drearily at tasks unworthy of them."

Ruth's excitement had vanished again, and she answered, lightly,—

"Nevertheless, farmers and gardeners all tell one that trees need frost and snow and many adversities to lighten the soil for their roots, and harden the wood; and so perhaps bad luck is not always a misfortune for human trees, in the long run."

Mrs. Powys smiled.

"I shall have the last word to that, Miss Charteris. They need sunshine afterwards, at any rate, to bring them to perfection and to ripen their fruit. And so let me rejoice in its coming to my boy at last. He will be all the better now for as much of it as may fall in his way."

In this Ruth acquiesced, and their further conversations on the subject were limited chiefly to facts about Throstlethwaite and Kester's Hill.

The Kennedys were to remain less than a week more at Homburg, and no further news came before they left it. Ruth was heartily glad to leave a place where she had suffered so much, and, though she had little hope of real enjoyment now, even in Alpine regions, she determined to do her best to be cheerful and happy.

CHAPTER XIX.

STEPHEN POWYS's thoughts during his rapid journey to England were naturally a good deal occupied with all that had just passed at Homburg. He made up his mind at once that, as far as he was concerned, nothing more would come of the affair. It would have been open to him, of course, to write to Mrs. L'Estrange himself, but it was not the sort of thing which he felt any inclination to do; and, having now left the matter entirely in Miss Charteris's hands, it never occurred to him to expect to hear of it again. This fellow Barrington was evidently her lover, and no one in their senses could suppose that she would now voluntarily betray him, and in doing so ruin all his prospects. He was sorry for her, and in his own mind bestowed sundry hard and uncomplimentary epithets on Leonard, feeling with indignant irritation that let his future position be ever so brilliant he could be no suitable husband for such a girl as she was.

It was intensely disagreeable to him to have been, even unintentionally, the means of giving her such pain as he

had read in her eyes and voice while they talked by the Stahl Brunnen; and though for himself the result was certainly a disappointment, he felt that it would have been "simply brutal" to have insisted on making the matter known to Mrs. L'Estrange.

An increase of income and more interesting work would have been dearly purchased at the cost of inflicting such pain and humiliation upon Miss Charteris as he must have done had he decided on speaking out. Perhaps after all it was best as it was. He had already a dim consciousness that the less he saw of her the better for his own peace. Even the faintest shadow of such a fancy on his own account was, he knew, the wildest absurdity; but he could not therefore reconcile himself to the thought of her throwing herself away upon a "false, mean sneak" like Leonard Barrington.

Stephen reached home late on Saturday evening, and, once there, was far too busy to waste any more time on such profitless dreams. There was no Sunday post at his out-of-the-way farm-house; and on Monday morning he was up and out hours before the arrival of the postman.

He was absent from home all day, attending to his work at the stone-quarries which he managed, and to various other matters at some distance, consequently, when he came in at night, he found waiting for him, among other things, both Ruth's letter and Mrs. L'Estrange's telegram.

The telegram said,—

"Miss Charteris has sent your address. Can you come down at once to see me? I will pay all expenses."

"Then she *has* written!" was Stephen's first thought. "How uncommonly plucky of her!"

He opened with rather eager curiosity the letter with the Homburg post-mark which lay on the table. The handwriting was not his mother's; therefore of course it

was from Miss Charteris, and would explain what she had done.

“DEAR MR. POWYS,—

“I have thought over what you said this morning, and I fully appreciate the generous offer you made of letting it all pass in silence; but I cannot take advantage of it. For the sake of every one concerned in the matter, I am sure it is best that the whole truth should be told to Mrs. L’Es-trange. You will probably hear from her soon, as I have written to her to tell her of my meeting you and to give her your address. Beyond this I have said nothing, but have referred her to Mr. Barrington for all explanation. I should wish, if possible, that she should never know that I have had anything to do with it. It had better be supposed to rest between you and Mr. Barrington and herself. To *him* I have written fully,—as I am sure you will soon hear from himself. I hope that all may soon be settled now.

“Yours truly,

“RUTH CHARTERIS.”

Stephen read this note through twice. With the help of the recollection of Ruth’s face as it had haunted him ever since he had turned away and left her under the acacia-trees, it was not difficult to him to read “between the lines;” and as his imagination gradually realized with very tolerable accuracy all the phases of feeling through which she must have passed before she could have forced herself to act as she had done, his heart was filled with a degree of admiration and compassion for her which, if his mother could have seen it, would have terribly alarmed her for his future peace of mind. She would almost have regretted that there should again apparently be a chance of his going to Throstlethwaite.

Since the time when his father's ruin had so completely altered all his prospects, Stephen had really been almost entirely banished from what is usually called "society." He had mixed in it only at long intervals and for very short periods, and it had ceased to form any important part of his life. He had not missed it much after the first few months, and an occasional visit from or to an old college or school friend had been relaxation enough for him. He had full and varied occupation,—hard work both for mind and body,—and he had naturally perfect health and very good spirits, so that he had neither leisure nor inclination to dwell upon grievances. The energetic activity and cheerful self-reliance which in unbroken prosperity might have had a tendency to make him somewhat overbearing and dictatorial had been turned to their full use in struggling against difficulties, and he had accepted the life which was thus assigned to him without the slightest wish to grumble at its conditions.

Those seven years had been neither unhappily nor unprofitably spent, and whether the quick, unquestioning decision with which he had originally adopted the life as a necessity had been an error of judgment or not, its consequences had done him no harm. Had the same circumstances arisen now, he would probably have met them differently; for his view of them as a youth of two-and-twenty had varied considerably from that which his calmer judgment and more matured experience would have led him to take seven years later; but he had done what he had thought right at the time, after deliberately counting the cost, and he had never regretted it. Looking back, indeed, was not much in his way; he had always found it enough to deal with the present. His life had been busy and active, yet with leisure both for books and thought, and he had enjoyed it.

It was only lately that he had begun to wish for a larger sphere, and for more society of his own kind ; and that wish had developed itself much more strongly after his day on Brideswater in the spring. To say that he had then fallen in love with Ruth Charteris would be to say too much ; but her beauty and grace and spirit, her frank, gracious pleasantness, and her unaffected cordiality had made a great impression on him.

He had seemed suddenly to become aware that his present mode of life could lead to no future ; and he had felt that, as his mother's health would now allow of it, he must try for something which would enable him to rise a little in the world, and so make marriage at some future time possible. That meeting with Ruth had certainly suggested these vague dreams, and the visionary wife who thenceforth held her place in them always a good deal resembled her ; but that perhaps was only natural, since his acquaintance among young ladies was very limited.

None of those whom he had casually met when he had visited relations or friends during the past seven years had interested him in the least ; and the romance of his life, so far, was still confined to the recollection of one or two violent attachments in his school-days, as serious to him then as they now seemed grotesque. He had felt absurdly disappointed in the spring, when nothing had come of Mrs. L'Estrange's inquiries about him, and though he was never inclined to dwell upon the gloomy side of anything, he had been more restless since, more anxious to find some way back into the wider channels of the world. His second meeting with Ruth, at Homburg, had stirred all this freshly, and the first renewal of hope that the failure of the negotiation had arisen only from a mistake, and that the opening which had so many

attractions was to be offered to him again, had been exceedingly pleasant to him.

All that then followed so rapidly had left him little time to think, and his firm refusal to have anything to do with revealing Leonard Barrington's conduct to Mrs. L'Estrange had been dictated simply by instinctive consideration for Ruth; but his judgment afterwards had quite acquiesced in his first hasty decision, and he had returned home fully convinced that it would have been impossible to act differently, and that there was nothing to be done but to forget it all.

This telegram and letter now unsettled everything again, and his thoughts were very busy during his solitary evening. He had always believed (though certainly without any particular grounds for doing so) that a woman was sure to be guided by her feelings, and that affection was usually her strongest motive for action; he had assumed, as a matter of course, that with any warm-hearted girl everything would go to the wall if it clashed with the fortunes of a lover; and, judging the question without much thought and from the man's point of view, he might have said that it was all right that it should be so.

He perceived, however, that in this case Miss Charteris had voluntarily sacrificed her feelings to her sense of honor and justice and her love of truth, and with this increased appreciation of her character there came to him so vivid a perception of all the torture which his revelations must have caused, that he almost wished that he had never seen her.

He had learned from herself that Leonard Barrington had been adopted many years ago by the L'Estranges, and therefore it followed that she had known him intimately from her childhood. That childish friendship

had grown into a stronger feeling, that in fact she loved him, had been clearly shown by her intense anxiety to know the truth of all this, by her eager defense of him at first with such quick, sensitive changes of color, and then by the bitter anguish of shame which she had not been able to conceal; and if she loved him, Stephen could imagine the cost at which her letters must have been written.

His contempt for Leonard was unbounded, and he rather enjoyed the thought of his sensations on receiving the letter which Ruth said that she had written to him; for if anything *could* make a fellow like that feel small, surely such a letter from the girl whom he loved must have the power to do it!

He wondered what would be the end of it all. Probably he should never know, for it was not likely that he should ever again be thrown in the way of all these people, although it had happened to him now to have it in his power materially to influence their fortunes. He had voluntarily resigned his right to a voice in the matter; but now, once more, an opportunity was offered to him of letting his life drift into the same current as theirs.

His mind thus came gradually to the question of his own reply to Mrs. L'Estrange. It admitted of little doubt. His presence among them would be painful to every one after all this,—every one meaning chiefly Ruth Charteris,—and he had better quietly decline to go. Mrs. L'Estrange might offer him the agency from a sense of justice, but she could not really wish him to take it; and he felt, with some sharp regret, that Miss Charteris must always henceforward shrink from seeing him.

It was too late to send either letter or telegram that night; but, being always prompt to act, he wrote a letter

to Mrs. L'Estrange, thanking her for sending for him, but saying that he felt sure she would agree with him in thinking that under the circumstances it was better for him not to come among them, and that he gratefully but decidedly declined to do so.

It was a sacrifice, but he was satisfied to make it.

"It will save *her* some of the trouble ahead, anyhow," he thought; "so it's worth doing."

And then he wrote a note to Ruth to the same effect as that to Mrs. L'Estrange. These still lay on his writing-table waiting to be posted, when the next morning brought him another letter on the same subject.

"DEAR MR. POWYS,—

"I am sorry to find, from the letters we have just received from Homburg, that my misapprehension of your friend Mr. Hillyer's information with regard to your engagements in America has nearly been the cause of depriving my aunt Mrs. L'Estrange of the chance of securing your services as her agent. I am glad, however, that it proves to be not yet too late, and that my careless blunder will have no permanent ill effects. I have told her that I have no doubt that the error was entirely mine, and not Mr. Hillyer's; but, as the matter is now fully explained and entirely set right, there is little use in dwelling upon this.

"You will, I hope, send a favorable answer to her telegram; and I trust all will soon be satisfactorily settled with her. I can safely assure you that you will find the position a pleasant one. With regard to the one occasion on which it seems that we met in town (though without knowing that we were destined to see more of each other in the future), I am quite sure that your experience of the world will make you agree with me that it is best withheld

from Mrs. L'Estrange's knowledge. Wise and kind and liberal-minded as she is, she is not without some strong prejudices, and it would be impossible in this case to make her see the thing in its true insignificance. It would cause her only anxiety and annoyance, needless no doubt, but none the less trying to her; and I have no hesitation in deciding, since the decision has wisely been left to me, that it will be best for us all that we meet as strangers. Only one explanation of our mutually agreeing to do so will be necessary, and that I will make at once. When you come down to Throstlethwaite, I hope I shall have many opportunities of proving myself not ungrateful for the service you rendered me that evening.

“Yours faithfully,

“LEONARD BARRINGTON.”

Leonard had not written this letter without some sense of shame; but, having made up his mind that his aunt must not know the truth, he felt that it was the only thing to be done. He was instinctively sure that Stephen Powys was to be trusted to take one of two courses. He might stay away rather than come down on these terms, or he might agree to them and come; but in either case he would be silent, and that was really all that mattered.

Stephen read this letter with amazement and contempt. His first impulse was to send off all the same the two letters he had written over-night; but then he remembered that he had assumed Mrs. L'Estrange's knowledge of all the circumstances, so that could not be done, and he must at any rate write another to her. Finally, he destroyed all three letters,—those he had written, as well as the one just received,—and made up his mind to go down at once, and judge for himself as to what it was best to do.

Mysteries were naturally distasteful to him, but in this case it was clearly not his business to tell such of Mr. Barrington's secrets as had come to his knowledge accidentally while he was yet quite unconnected with Mrs. L'Estrange. As the truth was to remain unknown to her anyhow, his presence at Throstlethwaite could not now be painful to her; of course the sight of him must be odious to Mr. Barrington; but "he seems able to swallow anything," thought Stephen, "and the more bitter the pill the better!"

There remained then only two reasons for declining so advantageous an employment,—one being the doubt whether he and Mr. Barrington could ever get on sufficiently well together for the surface harmony necessary for Mrs. L'Estrange's comfort; the other being the question of how far it would be tolerable to Ruth Charteris to meet him again after all this, and to see him and Mr. Barrington together.

Of the first point he should be able to judge when he had been at Throstlethwaite and seen Mrs. L'Estrange. The second would be less easy to decide; but some light might possibly be thrown even upon that, for at present he did not know whether any absolute engagement existed between them or not. If there were none, surely her affection could not survive all this, and there never would be one. In that case—it was prudent to stop there, but the indefinite future hope decided him for the moment. He telegraphed to Mrs. L'Estrange that he would go down immediately, and he wrote the note which Ruth had received from him at Homburg.

He wondered a little as to "the one necessary explanation" which Mr. Barrington had undertaken to give. Would he shirk it? No; for his own sake of course Miss Charteris must know that the truth was to remain

untold,—so some explanation he must give ; and Stephen did not envy him the task of doing it.

Utterly as he condemned and despised Leonard, he did, however, recognize that the one sign of grace in the whole wretched business was his careful avoidance of bringing in Miss Charteris's name. From that silence Stephen guessed that he did love her as well as so poor a creature could love any one ; but how he could have won her love in return was hopelessly puzzling. No affection that he could ever be capable of giving could be in the least degree worthy of her ; such a marriage must make her miserable in the end, and the only thing to hope was that she might recognize this in time, and have courage to free herself while it was possible.

That the letter which she had probably by this time received from Mr. Barrington would give her even deeper pain than she had felt before, Stephen did not doubt ; for to know that he had yielded once to what might certainly have been a strong temptation to a weak, self-seeking nature, was (though humiliating enough) nothing, in comparison to the thorough lowness of tone and utter want of moral courage shown by this cool, deliberate persistence in deception. Surely after all this his power over her would be gone !

With his head full of thoughts of Ruth, Stephen went down to Throstlethwaite ; and when he left it at the end of three days, he had finally agreed to return as soon as possible to enter upon his new duties.

He liked Mrs. L'Estrange extremely ; he felt that he could work with her to their mutual satisfaction ; and the prospect of managing a property so important, and so capable of improvement, was delightful to him, while the condition of living at Kester's Hill was in no way repugnant to him. A little trouble would make the old Manor

House a very pleasant home for his mother, and the liberal salary which Mrs. L'Estrange offered would more than double the income he had ever been able to make hitherto by all his various undertakings put together. There would be abundance of work,—but he liked work,—and there would also be abundance of pleasure. He had no longer any hesitation in accepting the appointment ; for he felt that he should be able to fill it well, and that it would suit him in every way.

As far as Leonard Barrington was concerned, he foresaw no serious difficulties ; for he soon perceived that, whether he were to be eventually the heir or not, he had not at present any real influence over Mrs. L'Estrange. Provided they could meet without difficulty in ordinary social intercourse, there would be no trouble, for they would never need to clash in business. Mrs. L'Estrange managed her own affairs in absolute independence ; or, if she consulted any one, it was Mr. Charteris.

Leonard came home for one night during Stephen's stay, because Mrs. L'Estrange wished that they should meet ; and Stephen was constrained to admit that he carried it off wonderfully well, contriving to escape an introduction by speaking cordially without waiting for one, and showing himself altogether at his best. Under no circumstances could they have been really congenial companions, and, as it was, a mutual dislike was inevitable ; but Stephen saw that it would be easy to maintain peace and outward courtesy, and that therefore Leonard need be no obstacle to his coming.

He ascertained, also, somehow, that no recognized engagement with Miss Charteris existed ; and that impression once firmly taken, he would not have been easily deterred from accepting a position which would bring him into the same neighborhood and throw him frequently

into her society. He wished to see how the story was to end.

Everything was quickly settled, and he went back to Devonshire to make the necessary arrangements for letting Mrs. Powys's farm and giving up all his work in the neighborhood. Fortune, which had neglected him for so long, now favored him remarkably. He was able at once to find a suitable and acceptable successor to most of his offices, as well as a good tenant for the house and farm, in a young man, the son of a wealthy farmer in that county, who had been working with him for some time as a sort of pupil and deputy. There was therefore as little delay as was possible in such a case; and before he went to bring his mother back from Germany he had completed his negotiations, and had transplanted himself and all their movable belongings to Kester's Hill.

CHAPTER XX.

THE Kennedys took Ruth home to Monksholme early in October; but after a very short visit they were to leave it again themselves, taking their children with them. They were not likely to be there again for a considerable time, for they were going first into Scotland to spend a fortnight with Colonel Kennedy's father, and after that it had been arranged that they should once more join households with Sir Everard and spend the winter with him in London, or, at any rate, as much of it as should pass before Colonel Kennedy had any professional work to take him elsewhere.

The six weeks spent in Switzerland had been, on the

whole, successful; and though Ruth's enjoyment of all she had seen had fallen very far short of the unclouded delight which she would have felt under the same circumstances the previous summer, she had really derived not only benefit but pleasure from the variety. From a sense of what was due to those with whom she traveled, she had from the first done her best to shake off the depression which she could not but feel, and the unselfish effort at self-control had brought its own reward in the gradually returning power of real enjoyment, and in the renewed vigor and freshness with which she was now prepared to meet the troubles inevitably in store for her.

The return home could not fail to bring back, in all its first acuteness, the pain which she had had to bear when at Homburg; but she had gained strength with which to meet it, and, hard as it must be to carry out the resolution she had taken, she did not mean to shrink from it.

None of her brothers were now at home. Bob had gone back to Eton; Oswald had been with them in Switzerland, instead of coming home for his summer holiday, and was now at work again in London; while Edgar's "long leave" would not begin till near Christmas. On the whole, though a very affectionate sister, Ruth was glad now to be free from the demands on her time and spirits always made by their presence at home.

The day before the Kennedys were to leave Monks-holme was during the morning one of the wildest of wet days among the mountains. All night long the wind had brought sheets of rain dashing fiercely against the windows, and the same thing continued all the forenoon; but about three o'clock the rain ceased entirely, the wind became more moderate, and the clouds slowly rose above the hills in solid gray masses.

"Good for a last walk, Ruth?" said Colonel Kennedy,

looking into the drawing-room half an hour later. "I think the rain is over for to-day. Shall we go and have a look at the floods?"

Ruth agreed at once, and went to equip herself properly.

A quarter of an hour afterwards she and her brother-in-law, accompanied of course by Quiz and Hector, set out on their walk. Colonel Kennedy suggested going up Friar's Fell, as likely to be the pleasantest thing they could do, and they therefore went in that direction.

The prospect of a couple of hours' walk on the mountains in a fresh wind, with a thoroughly congenial companion, was a relief to Ruth, for active exercise in the open air was at once more invigorating and more soothing to her than anything else; and with her brother-in-law she could either talk or be silent as she chose.

As yet she had not seen either Mrs. L'Estrange or Leonard or Mr. Powys; but Mrs. L'Estrange wished to see Colonel Kennedy, and wanted also to introduce Mr. Powys to Mr. and Mrs. Charteris, so she had begged that the whole party from Monksholme would dine at Throstlethwaite that evening. No one else was to be there; but Ruth knew that Leonard was to come home for the night on purpose, and that Mr. Powys, who had brought his mother to Kester's Hill about a week previously, was to come over to dine and sleep.

Let her strive as she might for courage and self-control, Ruth could not help dwelling on the pain and embarrassment which the evening must bring with it. To meet Leonard for the first time ~~must~~ be trying under any circumstances; but to meet him thus, in the presence of both Mr. Powys and Colonel Kennedy and in the absolute publicity of so small a party, would be *so* disagreeable that it required all Ruth's courage not to escape the

ordeal by staying at home under plea of a headache. She did not intend to do this ; she meant to go and bear it all as best she might ; but it was impossible that the anticipation should not oppress her, and though she had endeavored to appear in her usual spirits, and had been playing merrily with the children to help them through the whole long day in-doors, it was a relief to her now to come out for this walk.

To have been quite alone on the mountain-side, free to let her thoughts wander as they would, and to draw unconscious inspiration and strength from the wild beauty of such an evening on the fells, would have been perhaps *the best* in her present mood ; but Colonel Kennedy was as little disturbing a companion as any one could be, for, though he was ready enough to talk if there were occasion for it, silence was always perfectly acceptable to him, and he and Ruth were by this time on terms of such thorough brother-and-sister friendship and intimacy as to put all need for making conversation out of the question.

They went up through the wood to the lodge, where, much to their surprise, they found, deep in talk with the gamekeeper, Mr. Powys himself. He was holding his horse, from which he had apparently just dismounted. As Ruth and Colonel Kennedy came up, he turned to speak to them. There was a slight hesitation of manner as he greeted Ruth which Colonel Kennedy saw and interpreted rightly : he was uncertain of what his reception might be. Ruth saw it too, and, sharply painful though it was to her to meet him again after all that had passed, her strong sense of justice came to her aid. She was generous as well as just ; she understood at once the doubt which Mr. Powys might easily feel, and determined to show him that she thought he had acted rightly and wisely throughout. She went forward quickly and

held out her hand, saying, firmly and cordially, though with a varying color,—

“I am very glad to see you, and to welcome you to our north country.”

Stephen fully appreciated the effort she had made, and his face and voice showed that he did, though he only said, “You are very kind,” and busied himself in responding to the vehement demonstrations of recognition which Quiz was bestowing upon him.

“Quiz is not ungrateful, you see,” said Ruth, glad of something easily superficial to say. “He quite remembers your help that day by the lake; and one could almost believe that he was telling the story to Hector and presenting you to him as a friend!”

As she spoke, Quiz had rushed away from Stephen, and was bounding round his bigger companion, barking furiously with little, short, quick barks of excitement and pleasure; the next thing he did was to return and coil himself at Stephen’s feet in a sort of vibrating ball before again jumping up against him; after which he once more dashed off to Hector. It was impossible not to laugh, and not to watch their proceedings. Hector first inspected Stephen with great dignity, and assumed an air of grave wisdom as he slowly sniffed round his legs; then, as Stephen smiled and stroked his head, he rose on his hind legs, and, solemnly placing two very muddy paws on his arm, tried to lick his face.

“Oh, Hector, down!” exclaimed Ruth, laughing. “Don’t let him take liberties, Mr. Powys. But Quiz has evidently told him all about it, and he has adopted you as a friend; and Hector’s friendships are constant. How does Mrs. Powys get on at Kester’s Hill? Our climate has given you rather a rough reception, but I hope she bears it pretty well.”

Stephen gave a report of his mother, who was unusually well, and quite happily settled at Kester's Hill. He himself had come over to Throstlethwaite early in the morning, having much to do there, and he was now on his way to Thornbeck to see some people on business. The heavy rains had washed the road very bare, and one of the many loose pebbles about had got into his horse's foot. He had dismounted to take it out, and the gamekeeper, who happened to be near, had helped him.

"I must not linger here now," he added, "if I am to be back in good time; and I ought not to keep you from your walk."

"We are going up Friar's Fell," Ruth said. "I think there will be a fine view. We shall see you this evening." And, calling her dogs, she crossed the road with Colonel Kennedy and passed through the gate leading to Friar's Fell.

For fully half an hour they walked steadily and in unbroken silence up the gorge between Friar's Fell and Bridesmoor. It was not possible to Ruth to pass the craggy point beneath which she had been sitting that day in the spring when Leonard had joined her, without recalling all that had then been said by them both. Even then he had not been wholly true; the confidence which had won from her the first openly-spoken acknowledgment that she looked upon herself as pledged to share his life, with all its hopes and fears and difficulties, had been but a half confidence; and yet she believed that he really loved her, and she shrank from the thought of the explanation between them which must come.

His last words to her that morning had been, "Don't you think that *between us* we may hope to get to the top of the hill pretty soon?" The flooded beck that was now rushing down the gorge seemed to repeat the words mock-

ingly in her ears ! She could not and she would not follow him in the path which he had chosen as the one to lead them to the "top of the hill ;" and to tell him so was the task that lay before her.

She had always been very susceptible to external influences, and she loved the mountains and streams among which she had been brought up, as if they were living friends. From her childhood she had been accustomed to seek and find both sympathy and counsel from the silent crags and noisy waters ; for the thoughts and feelings they suggested to her scarcely seemed her own, and the idea of there being tongues in the trees and brooks, or sermons in stones, was to her no mere poetical fancy, but a priceless reality. To-day, however, nature was in a cheerless mood, and as they walked quickly up the gorge through the young plantations covering Friar's Fell, the steep, rough slope of Bridesmoor rising so close to them on the opposite side was grand, undoubtedly, but gloomy and stern, suggestive more of thoughts of difficulty and failure, if it were to represent the "hill of life," than of hope and happiness.

At length they reached the shoulder of the hill at the top of the gorge, and on turning a corner of high rocks, a view of the whole of Thorndale opened before them. The lake of Thornsmeres lay beyond the town of Thornbeck, like a sheet of dull, dark lead, the sky almost matching it ; the craggy fells surrounding it looked dark and low, and the higher ranges in the background were wrapped in clouds. The full, rushing, muddy river Thorne had overflowed its banks nearly all the way between Thornsmeres and Brideswater, and hedges, trees, and railings just showed above the water in the flooded fields.

Ruth felt as if it were very like the dreary reality of life, as it appeared to her just now. She looked at

the white lines down the mountains, each representing a lively foaming brook dashing merrily on over the rocks only to lose itself in the still, dark, gloomy lake, and they seemed to her to picture fairly enough the hopes and joys of youth, quenched so soon in painful experience of life, and flowing on afterwards only to swell the muddy river of human sorrows and disappointments. Suddenly she became conscious, as she stood looking down on the view, that Colonel Kennedy was watching her anxiously and gravely. She laughed, and began to move on.

"I never saw it look less exhilarating!" she said, lightly. "Let us get on to the top, and hope that the other side may be brighter."

Colonel Kennedy now threw away the cigar which he had been smoking during their silent walk, and began to discuss the height of the flood, the force of the water, and a variety of matter-of-fact questions which effectually roused Ruth from her dreams.

A quarter of an hour's walking brought them to the top of the mountain, which was a low one, and then they suddenly lost sight of Thornbeck and Thornsmere, which lay behind them as they faced westwards and looked down the valley to the foot of Brideswater, and so on to the sea. In the distance over the sea the clouds had cleared quite away, and a streak of clear sky, lovely with all the hues of the coming sunset, looked almost dazzlingly brilliant, while the faint gray outline of the Scotch hills on the opposite coast was clearly visible beyond it. Ruth exclaimed at the beauty of the scene.

"You were making gloomy comparisons just now," said Colonel Kennedy, "drawing dismal analogies between nature and life, were you not? Finish your poem here, then, with that sunset. Everything ought to have a happy ending, if possible."

"Yes,—if possible," acquiesced Ruth, with a smile ;
"but it can't always be possible !"

"Not if we make up our minds to accept one ending and no other as a happy one. But I think, Ruth, *you* are reasonable enough to admit that the fate which people fix upon for themselves as the one most to be desired would often be by no means the best for them really, and that in the very failure of their most cherished hopes they ultimately find their best happiness. In fact, I think a general smash of early castles in the air is often the best thing that can happen. It clears the ground for more rational erections, even though it may leave an ugly blank for a time."

"But things don't happen in that complete way," said Ruth. "It would be easier if they did. If your castle doesn't smash, but totters, you must have the difficulty of deciding for yourself what the end is to be."

"Of choosing between completing its ruin and making believe that it stands firm when you know that it does not?" replied Colonel Kennedy. "Not much choice there, Ruth, I think. One hears a great deal of moralizing about 'neglected opportunities' and 'wasted chances,' and so on, but it seems to me that the turning-points in most people's lives are their mistakes. We all make them. Sometimes we don't discover that they *are* mistakes till too late to do more than make the best of their consequences,—or the worst ; but very often the false step *is* seen in time to be retrieved, if there is moral courage to do it ; only there is not,—and for want of it a whole life is spoiled."

They had left the top of the hill now, and were walking quickly homewards. Ruth perfectly understood what Colonel Kennedy meant ; but it was not easy to answer him, and there was rather a long silence, broken at last

by a remark from him on some commonplace topic, made merely to show her that he had no intention of trying to force her confidence.

She answered him, and then again they were silent until they had left the hill and were in the wood between the lodge and the house. Then, in the fading light under the dark Scotch firs, Ruth suddenly spoke.

"Nigel, I don't want to pretend not to understand what you said just now up on Friar's Fell. I know you have seen enough to guess pretty well what has been making this summer rather hard to get through; and it is kind of you to care. I know you would help me if you could; but there are some things in which nobody can help one,—directly. Indirectly you *have* helped me all these past weeks more than I can tell you; only I can't talk about it."

There was so much feeling in her voice as she spoke, that Colonel Kennedy was a good deal touched by it, though he only showed it by speaking rather more abruptly than usual.

"I believe that talking generally does more harm than good; and I know well enough that we must all live our own lives, Ruth,—but one can't help seeing the under-current of other people's sometimes, and wishing to help."

"And if I thought that any one could help me, it would be to you that I should come, Nigel; but, as it is, I must do the best I can by myself. I could not tell you facts that concern other people; and what would be the good of asking advice in that case? Besides, I don't think, really, it is often advice that one wants in things of this kind; it is not so difficult to know what one ought to do as to find courage to do it,—and *that* you have helped me to find,—in a hundred ways; and I want you to know

that I feel it,—that I am not ungrateful for all you have been to me this summer.”

“Poor child!” Colonel Kennedy said, almost involuntarily; “it has been a hard time for you, and I fear the pain is not over yet. Don’t be afraid,” he added, as she turned away with a sudden shiver; “I am not going to talk about it much now, and I will never even allude to it again; but I have been very anxious for you, Ruth, I admit,—afraid lest you should not be brave in time. Now, I am satisfied. I am sorry for what still lies before you, but I am much more glad to know, as I do know now, that you will not make the fatal mistake of joining your life to one that would only drag you down. It is bad enough for a man when he finds out that he has done it; but for a woman it is infinitely worse. With her more limited independence and quicker sensitiveness, she must either sink, herself, to the lower level, or be utterly wretched.”

“The last in any case,” Ruth exclaimed, quickly; “but better that only, than both!”

“I told you, up there, to take a good look at that second view and to finish off your fancies after its fashion!” said Colonel Kennedy, in the half-earnest, half-jesting tone he often used. “You will find yourself some day, I hope, in a calm, deep sea under a clear sky, and will know how to value real happiness all the better for having, like your friends the brooks, passed first through those gloomy leaden lakes and all the turmoil of that muddy flooded river.”

“Oh, Nigel! how could you guess what I was thinking up there?” she exclaimed, in surprise.

“Your eyes betrayed you,” he answered; “and the idea was rather obvious. Now, you have not more than time to go in and rest and dress. I will put up the dogs.”

He turned off towards the offices as he spoke, and left her alone.

When the party from Monksholme entered the drawing-room at Throstlethwaite that evening, Mrs. L'Estrange and Mr. Powys were there alone. Leonard's train had been a little late, and he had not yet come down from dressing. There were greetings and introductions, and Ruth hoped that the agitation which was making her alternately hot and cold would pass unobserved, for she was standing near the fire in rather a quiet corner, and the room was not much lighted. She was answering a question from Mr. Powys about her walk that afternoon, when suddenly, almost in the middle of her sentence, he turned away from her and walked to the other side of the room.

Then she saw that Leonard had come in, that he was speaking to her mother and Agatha, and must come to her in another moment. Even at the time she recognized the consideration which prompted Mr. Powys to move away out of sight and hearing of their first meeting.

The hand she gave to Leonard was icy cold, and, though his look and touch brought the color to her face,—for he was standing between her and the rest of the party, and ventured on making both significant,—the eyes which met his were grave and troubled.

"She means to worry," he thought, rather impatiently, but he had to turn away the next moment to take Mrs. Charteris to dinner.

The table was round, and the conversation was general, which spared Ruth from being obliged to take much part in it. She was placed between Leonard and Mr. Powys, but she said very little to either, for she could not be easy and unconstrained. Her mind was very busy. She saw that Leonard had evidently risen in his aunt's favor since

she herself had left home four months ago, for her manner to him was kind and motherly, and he was evidently more at ease with her than he had been formerly.

He looked well and cheerful, and, except for a moment's awkward consciousness on first meeting her, Ruth could detect no sign of shame or regret, no trace of any secret oppression of spirits. Leonard always enjoyed society and appeared to advantage in it, for he had the natural gifts of good looks and pleasing manners, and was perfectly free from all personal conceit or affectation. He could talk pleasantly and well on most of the topics of the day, and this evening he was doing his best to be agreeable; but each light sentence and gay laugh jarred on Ruth's nerves.

Once or twice, when he was left at liberty, he turned to her and showed an evident anxiety to make her talk to him; but she could not do it. She saw clearly what he intended. He meant to have no discussion of the past, to make no allusion to the letters that had been written, but to assume that all was right now, as much to her satisfaction as to his own, and to treat their secret understanding and engagement as an accepted fact without further explanation.

When the gentlemen came into the drawing-room after dinner, Agatha, who was an excellent musician, was at the piano, and, under cover of her brilliant music, Leonard after a time went up to Ruth, and, leaning quietly against the mantelpiece, began to talk to her. She was sitting back in a low chair, rather in the shadow, and as he, in speaking to her, necessarily turned rather away from the others, he felt safe from inconvenient scrutiny.

"I have lots to tell you, Ruth, and nothing but good news," he began, speaking in the low, monotonous tone

which of all others is the safest from being overheard. "I have got on beyond my hopes, and I am pretty sure now that the three years we talked of may be halved."

Ruth murmured something about being "very glad," but she could not look up, and felt as if the words would choke her. She fully perceived now the selfish want of consideration for her which could thus persist in forcing upon her the recollection of her secret promise to him, and she bitterly regretted the weakness which had allowed her ever to drift into such a position as that in which she stood towards him.

Leonard bent lower towards her, and almost whispered,—

"One year more from this present time will see me quite free, I really believe; and *then*, Ruth——"

But Ruth did not, as he expected, look up with a blush and a smile which she might intend to be reproving, but which would be scarcely discouraging: she grew very pale, and, hastily leaving her seat, moved to one close to Mrs. L'Estrange, where she was safe from all fear of being disturbed.

Not long afterwards there was a discussion about the plans for the church at Kester's Hill, which had been sent in for Mrs. L'Estrange's approval by various architects. She wished to show them to Colonel Kennedy and Ruth.

"They are all on the table in the library," she said, "and if you don't mind coming there it will be the least trouble to everybody, I think. Will you go before us, Leonard, and light the candles?"

The whole party went to the library; the plans were inspected and discussed; and then, after a time, Mrs. L'Estrange said,—

"But I must not be deprived of Agatha's promised song. Let us go back to the drawing-room."

Leonard stayed behind the rest for a moment, to cover the drawings and extinguish the candles, and was just going to follow them, when he became aware that Ruth had not left the room. She was standing by the hearth, where a wood fire was burning. Leonard knew her far too well to think for a moment that she had lingered there for the sort of interview which would have been pleasant enough to him. He knew that she wanted to speak of what it was hateful to him to think of, and he was strongly tempted to pretend not to see her, and to return to the drawing-room, whence Agatha's clear soprano now made itself heard.

He had chosen to act dishonorably for his own interest, he intended to persevere in the untruth, and now that all was going smoothly he was quite able to enjoy himself and to forget it; but in his heart he *was* ashamed of what he had done, and it was irritating to him to be reminded of what he knew to be degrading to him, and which yet was known not only to Ruth but to Mr. Powys. He would not talk about it; and he turned towards the door.

Those who feel pain the most acutely are often, however, not the least brave in facing it when there is need for doing so, and Ruth had made up her mind to speak. She knew that they must meet again the following evening at a ball at Edenford, given by the bachelors of the county: explanation *there* would certainly be impossible, and the longer she allowed the present state of things to continue without protest, the more difficult it would be to end it.

"Leonard!" she said; and he could not avoid going to her.

It was a wide, old-fashioned hearth, and large logs of wood rested on the dogs above a mass of glowing embers

which cast a strange red light on Ruth's white dress and pale, troubled face.

"I won't keep you a minute——" she began.

Foreseeing a tiresome argument, Leonard quickly determined on what line to take, and interrupted her by an eager, lover-like protest. She checked him at once by a look and gesture which he could not withstand, and went on gently and gravely.

"I have not very much to say, Leonard, but I *must* get it said at once. Listen patiently, and do not be angry with me if you can help it. I did not answer your letter because I thought it better to wait to speak, so that there might be no possibility of any misunderstanding. I don't want to seem to judge your conduct, but it is clear to me, now, that we see things so differently that we must not make any more plans for the future together. The sort of secret engagement we *had* made was wrong; but, quite apart from that, it must end now."

"Oh, Ruth!" he exclaimed, reproachfully. "And for such a mere crotchet you would throw me over, when you know all that you are to me, and have been ever since we were children. You *cannot* mean it seriously."

"It is no crotchet," Ruth answered, sadly, for his look and tone tried her resolution severely. "Leonard, don't let us argue. I would have shared poverty and disgrace with you willingly, and would have done my best to help you; but I will have no part, now or ever, in a life of which the prosperity is gained at the cost of truth and honor. It is useless to ask it."

A sudden deep flush crossed Leonard's face, as he retorted,—

"Ruth, if you can even think of me in that way, you can never have loved me as I believed you did."

He spoke angrily, and moved one of the large logs im-

patiently with his foot. It sent up a dazzling shower of sparks, and a sudden fitful blaze flashed on Ruth's face and showed him what a painful effort she was making as she answered him with a grave, frank dignity which effectually silenced his petulance.

"Do not let us quarrel, Leonard. It is no question of our feeling for one another. I do not doubt your love for me; it *has been* very precious to me; while if I had not loved *you*, the last few weeks would not have been so hard to live through, and it would not cost me so much to say this now."

"Ruth, it is folly to talk of parting like this!" Leonard exclaimed, vehemently. "You say you do not doubt my passionate love for you; you admit that you love me; then what more is there to be said? Forget the past,—it is over,—and think only of the future before us. You shall never suffer again because of my short-comings, so do let yourself be happy, my darling. I cannot bear to see you look as you look now, because of me; or to think of the way you have been tormenting yourself so unnecessarily all this time. Let your conscience rest, and be reasonable. I must have my own bright Ruth again! Surely, dearest, if we love each other,—as you own we do,—it is enough?"

He had spoken too fast and too earnestly to be stopped before this, but now Ruth drew back from him gently but decidedly, and raised her eyes, so full of suffering that he could not bear to meet them, and turned away.

"Much,—but not enough," she said. "Love without reverence is a lifeless, worthless thing; and mine for you is gone,—destroyed by yourself. We have been friends all our lives, Leonard; let us be friends still—but we can never again be more."

She spoke with perfect self-command, but there was a

ring of pain in her voice which Leonard could not bear. He had never before appreciated her so truly, or admired her so much. He felt the full value of what was being withdrawn from him, and determined that he would not give her up. It might be hard to regain his power over her,—but she *had* loved him,—she loved him still; and he would win her back at any sacrifice,—save one. He could not yield to her in this; but it was only a passing fancy on her part; it must be humored to a certain extent; but, wisely dealt with, it could not withstand the efforts he would make to recover the ground he had lost. He felt in his heart that she was right, but he would not own it; he hated to recall the past, but he could not risk all his prospects in life by a confession, really purposeless, since the wrong he had done was now righted.

These thoughts passed quickly through his mind in the few moments of silence after Ruth ceased to speak. Then, as she began to move away, he suddenly caught both her hands, and spoke with an abrupt passion which forced her to listen.

“I *will* not accept this rejection as final, Ruth!” he said. “When I think of what we have been to each other all our lives, I refuse to believe that you can cast me off in this way for such a trifle,—a mere difference of opinion! That I don’t attempt to defend any part of that London business, you know; it is hateful to me to recall it; you cannot condemn it more severely than I do now. It was a wretched mess from beginning to end,—foolish,—wrong,—idiotic; but it is past now, and I think you are neither just nor reasonable about the present. You ought not to expect me to yield my judgment to yours, on a question which you cannot possibly understand as well as I do. Such points are for men to decide; they are quite out of a woman’s province, and no girl can be a judge in

such a case. Your harsh judgment now I must bear as the punishment for the wrong I confess, and I will say no more until I am free and have won my place in the world ; but our estrangement cannot and shall not last after that. I will prove to you that your love *can* come back to full life, and that one mistake need not leave a lasting blot."

He felt her tremble ; he saw the conflict of feeling in her face ; his torrent of words had power to shake her terribly, and he thought he had conquered ; but she drew her hands away from him, and answered, firmly,—

"We are giving each other useless pain, Leonard. The blot need not be lasting if you choose to efface it ; but as it is, though the affection we have felt for each other may make it very hard to part in this way, it would make a life together intolerable to both of us, when we think so differently."

She left the room as she spoke.

The rest of the evening was short, and Ruth knew very little of what passed. She forced herself to return to the drawing-room ; but, as it was growing late and her father had ordered the carriage, there was sufficient general bustle to do away with much need for exertion, and she escaped notice except from those of the party whose first thought was to help to screen her from observation.

Colonel Kennedy was grieved that she should suffer, but he was glad that it was over ; and Mr. Powys wondered what had been the real state of things between them previously, but rejoiced in the certainty that the interview just over had evidently been a parting.

"You all go to Nethercroft, to-morrow, for the Edenford ball?" said Mrs. L'Estrange, at the last. "When do you come home, Ruth?"

"On Saturday."

"Then, if Monday is fine, will you drive over to

Kester's Hill with me, to call on Mrs. Powys? I will send her back to you on Tuesday, Mrs. Charteris, if you will let me have her for that one night."

No objection was made, and it was settled that Ruth was to go over to Throstlethwaite early on Monday morning.

CHAPTER XXI.

RUTH had never felt in a mood less suited to gayety than she did now, and she would gladly have avoided the impending three days' visit to Nethercroft, if it had been possible. She had, however, no choice in the matter; and perhaps after all it was easier to assume the superficial spirits needed to pass unobserved at such a time than to be quietly cheerful at home. It was disagreeable to her to be taken to Nethercroft, because of her position with regard to Mr. Allonby; but to have confided this to her mother would have been merely to impose upon herself a useless penance: so she went without protest.

The Edenford ball was as severe an ordeal as she had expected it to be. She did not wish to quarrel with Leonard, nor yet to excite remark by avoiding him, and therefore did not try to escape from dancing with him when he asked her, though to do it tried her almost beyond her strength.

Leonard had thought of little else but Ruth since their parting the previous evening, and was oppressed and out of spirits. He was determined to conquer her resolution to give him up, and he was hopeful of ultimately succeeding; but he saw that the task would not be easy, and would need unfailing tact and judgment and self-control.

He had tried at first to be *only* angry with her, and to think that if she chose to treat him so unreasonably she was right in saying that they would be better apart ; but she was too necessary to him for that state of mind to last long.

He was more really in love with her than he had ever been, and resolved at last that she *should* be his wife in the end, and that he would make her give back in full measure the affection which she evidently found it so hard to withdraw from him. He knew her up to a certain point so well that he was able to guess what course it would be wisest to follow.

He did not torment her at this ball, but she felt that she was never for a moment out of his thoughts. During the two dances which were all that he asked for, he did not talk much, and appeared (with perfect truth) anxious and ill at ease.

Geuine feeling, of whatever nature, never fails to give the power of affecting others, and Ruth could not be indifferent to his obvious depression. But, though it distressed her, it did not shake her purpose.

Nethercroft was only a few miles from Edenford, and the same sort of thing was repeated when Leonard dined there the following evening ; but, painful though it all was, Ruth felt that it was well perhaps to have been thus forced at once into commonplace intercourse. The inevitable awkwardness of the first meeting after that scene in the library at Throstlethwaite was at any rate over without delay, and nothing in the future could be so trying. Other troubles than this, with Leonard she had none during that visit to Nethercroft, for, greatly to her relief, she found that Mr. Allonby was not at home.

Early on the following Monday Ruth went over to Throstlethwaite. It was a fine autumn morning, very

suitable for the expedition to Kester's Hill, and she would have enjoyed the idea of it, but for a dread that Mrs. L'Estrange might ask inconvenient questions about all that had passed at Homburg. - As it happened, however, there were many other things which she wished to talk about, and she did not speak of either Leonard or Mr. Powys until they were near the end of their drive. Then she said, rather suddenly, —

"I really think I am fortunate in having found this Mr. Powys at last, Ruth. I like him very much already, and I think I shall soon value him highly. My boy's instinct was a true one, and it is pleasant to me to feel that I owe it to him. It seems to associate him with all that I do."

"I am glad that Mr. Powys answers your expectations," Ruth answered. "We did not see much of him."

"No; I suppose not," replied Mrs. L'Estrange. "Certainly, Leonard and Mr. Hillyer were wonderfully careless and stupid about it! But really Leonard has been doing so well and satisfying me so thoroughly in all ways lately that I could not make any great fuss about it, especially as no real harm was done. Your encountering the Powyses at Homburg was most fortunate; and, by the way, how strange that he should have been the man you met that day by the lake!"

"Yes," said Ruth. "If I had only not been too discreet to gratify my curiosity by asking his name then, it would have saved everybody a great deal of trouble. However, it is all comfortably settled now."

"The only thing that puzzles me," replied Mrs. L'Estrange, "is that he and Leonard do not get on at all well together. They are quite civil, but very much more formal than it is natural for two young men to be; and I

can see that they do not like each other, and keep apart if they can. Why, I cannot imagine, for Leonard certainly began by being quite frank in regretting his mistakes, and was friendly as well as courteous when I first introduced them ; and if Mr. Powys allows himself to go on resenting the original blunder, it is rather small and unworthy of him,—a piece of temper so unlike what he seems otherwise.”

That Leonard should be thus praised for perfect frankness and friendly courtesy, while Mr. Powys was supposed to be cherishing a petty feeling of unreasonable resentment, filled Ruth with mingled shame and indignation as she recalled the real facts of the case.

“I should not think it is at all likely,” she said. “He does not seem that sort of man. They are very different ; and I suppose——”

Fortunately for Ruth, the carriage stopped at this moment at the end of a narrow lane, very near the beginning of the new village of Kester’s Hill.

“I shall not keep you waiting long,” said Mrs. L’Estrange. “I am only going to a cottage a little way down this lane, to see a woman who is very ill and in great poverty. Mr. Powys told me about her the other day.”

She left the carriage and went down the lane to the cottage, the footman following her to carry a large package and basket, and Ruth, grateful for the interruption to their conversation, leaned back with a sense of relief, and tried to banish painful recollections. Her efforts were not very effectual, but external help soon offered itself. Old Daniel turned round on his box and addressed her.

“Miss Ruth, I’ve been wantin’ to have a word with you.”

Ruth looked up and smiled.

“What is it, Daniel?”

"Well, it's just about Joe, Miss Ruth. He doesn't settle in his new place over there, though it's a good place enough. He's just got a hankerin' to be home, you see, and I'd like well enough to have him a bit nearer hand if I could, and if I thought t' sight on him wouldn't hurt missis."

"I am sure it would not," replied Ruth. "She only sent him to Ireland because he was so miserable at home."

"And I wouldn't think of havin' him at our place again, Miss Ruth, not if it was ever so! But Mr. Powys here, t' new man, he's wantin' a groom; and I thought, mebbe, if you could make sure o' t' missis not mindin', you would speak for Joe. He'll not find a better groom, nor a steadier, civiller lad nor Joe, let him go where he will; but you see, Miss Ruth, Mr. Powys hasn't no knowledge o' me, and so where'd be t' good o' me crackin' on him, ever so hard, when he's my own? And I wouldn't like, neither, for him not to know t' whole o' yon job last spring; but I couldn't tell it him, 'twould go nigh to choke me to speak on it; and so I thought I'd make bold and ask, and mebbe you'd not mind doin' it."

Ruth could feel for the old man, who evidently was lonely without either Frank or his own son, and though she could not say that she should not mind speaking about it, she did not hesitate.

"Very well, Daniel," she said. "It seems a good notion of yours for Joe, and I will speak to both Mrs. L'Estrange and Mr. Powys about it for you. I am sure he would find Joe a good servant, and I should think he would be a good master. The people like him, I hope?"

"I haven't heard no compliments on him, not yet," was the cautious reply.

Ruth smiled.

"It will take a little while for him to learn our North-

country ways, you know," she said, remembering Daniel's objection to "lads frae t' south."

"He's better nor some, to start with," replied Daniel, judicially; and Ruth knew that the words implied a singularly favorable opinion of a stranger.

"I am glad you like him," she said.

"In course, you can't expect a young chap like him to have t' sense of old Bailey," was Daniel's response, "but his sort's quicker to learn nor t' parsons; they sees a deal more o' human natur', and hears what folks thinks. Them lads that turns priests when they're just away frae school, they haven't a fair chance to get taught a bit sense; it's nowt but teachin' other folks when they'd be a deal better for learnin' theirsels; but a man like Mr. Powys gets a deal of experience, Miss Ruth; he hasn't got all t' talk to hissel', but just has to take t' rough and t' smooth together, and make t' best he can o' what he doesn't like."

"Mr. Powys has had a good deal of experience of trouble already," replied Ruth; "but of course he is young still, and will grow wiser in time."

"Folks cracks on him already," answered Daniel, ready to praise as soon as he was not required to do so. "T' missis'll soon find t' comfort of havin' a man like him about,—one that's a real gentleman and that people 'll have a bit respect for, instead of one like t' old man, that wasn't much above t' rest on us."

Ruth was satisfied that Mr. Powys had made a good beginning and was already both liked and respected; but, as Mrs. L'Estrange now returned to her, she heard no more.

The village of Kester's Hill was about ten miles lower down the river than Otter's Bridge, and was only three or four miles from the sea. The country near it was bleak and bare, and the village ugly and straggling, while

the iron-works certainly added neither to its beauty nor to its pleasantness.

As they drove through it, Ruth wondered how Mrs. Powys would like such a home. It was quite conceivable that her son might not even perceive its dreariness, for he was necessarily much away from it, and when there would have constant active employment; but to his mother, who never left home, and who would have no variety either of work or of pleasure, Ruth thought it must be an unpleasant change from the Devonshire farm.

The old Manor House was, however, nearly a quarter of a mile from the village, and was at any rate quiet. There was a square walled garden in front of the house, and at present no means of driving up to the door. The carriage stopped at the gate of the garden, and a straight flagged walk led up to the house, which was a quaint, solid-looking, low, stone building, with an air of comfort certainly, but of hopeless dullness, being shut in by its walls so that no view even of such country as there was could be obtained. Mr. Powys came to meet them at the door, and took them through a picturesque, low-roofed little hall to a room at the back of the house.

"I have made the room to the back my mother's," he said to Mrs. L'Estrange. "It is the smallest, but it is sunny and the view is pretty, which matters more to her than space."

Mrs. Powys was established in a room so cheerful and pretty that Ruth exclaimed in surprise. It was not large, and it was low, but it was oak-paneled, and had a couple of windows to the south,—one a deep oriel. The furniture was as simple as it well could be, but it was all that was needed for comfort and refinement; and, with an abundance of books and some flowers, the room was as attractive as any one could wish.

Mrs. Powys was now in much better health, and could move about easily ; and though receiving Mrs. L'Estrange evidently made her nervous, she was more cheerful than Ruth had ever seen her.

While the two older ladies exchanged necessary civilities, Ruth went to the window, and was surprised to find that there was an extremely pretty view from it. The house on that side looked over one or two steeply-sloping fields, studded with trees here and there, to the river Thorne, which flowed with numerous sharp curves through the meadows ; its opposite bank was higher and thickly wooded, and in the distance the mountains were distinctly visible in the soft, dark-blue haze of a fine autumn morning.

Luncheon followed almost immediately on their arrival, and, though the dining-room was a good deal larger, Ruth felt that Mr. Powys had chosen wisely in making the other room his mother's.

After luncheon, Mrs. L'Estrange went out with him to inspect various things in the village, while Ruth remained with Mrs. Powys, whom she found quite content with her new home.

"The house is roomy and comfortable," she said, "and Mrs. L'Estrange has done all that was possible to improve it for us. On *my* side it is pretty and cheerful ; but if it were twenty times uglier and more dull than it is on the other, I should not mind it at all, for Stephen is quite in his right place at last. He has work that is worth doing, he will have society suited to him, and he will be appreciated. He has also now an income which will relieve him from daily anxiety, and even enable him to think a little of the future. It is double that which all his hard work has ever brought him before, while there is no reason that our expenses should be greater."

If the Powyses were so well content with their present position, Ruth felt that their previous one must indeed have been very far from prosperous; for, after all, six hundred a year (which was what she knew Mrs. L'Estrange had offered to him) with a home at Kester's Hill was no such very great good fortune, and seemed quite inadequate to provide both for present comfort and for "the future." Yet this was all they had, except the rent of Mrs. Powys's house and farm in Devonshire, which she had said was now—thanks to Stephen's improvements—one hundred and fifty pounds.

The pleasure so frankly expressed in the present made Ruth very compassionate as to the past as far as Stephen was concerned. It did seem hard that he should have had to labor so indefatigably for so little.

Later in the afternoon, when Mrs. L'Estrange and Stephen came in again, they all went over the house that she might see the result of the improvements she had endeavored to make. The inspection ended, they returned to the little drawing-room, and Mrs. Powys ordered tea.

"You should show Miss Charteris your own den, Mr. Powys," said Mrs. L'Estrange. "The carriage is coming at five, Ruth; but there is time enough for Mr. Powys to show you some beautiful drawings which I saw in his room this afternoon; and, as you sketch yourself, they will interest you even more than they did me."

Stephen willingly led the way to a room opposite the dining-room, and also looking to the front of the house.

"It is scarcely fit for inspection, Miss Charteris," he said, as he opened the door. "It isn't beautiful, I know, and you will think it very untidy; but it is extremely comfortable and convenient. I assure you I glory in its size, after what I have been used to for so long."

The room was certainly not small, and looked habit-

able enough, though Ruth could scarcely help smiling at the indescribable mass of masculine litter scattered in every direction. There was a huge writing-table in the middle of the room, with drawers innumerable, and covered with papers, plans, and account books; *there*, at any rate, perfect order evidently reigned, but elsewhere all was rather in confusion. The walls were lined with shelves, on some of which a good collection of books was arranged and apparently well cared for; while the others were occupied by whips and sticks, guns and cartridges, fishing-rods and baskets and every conceivable sort of possession. In one corner was a carpenter's bench, with tools and a heap of shavings; in another, a stand with hats and coats and a pair of gigantic fisherman's boots; and in the window was a smaller table, covered with drawings and drawing-materials.

"I have to turn my hand to everything," Stephen said, as he observed Ruth's amused glance round the room.

"Your room looks as if you did," replied Ruth, with a smile. "You seem to have everything in it a man can want for work or play. It does look very convenient and comfortable for its purpose; and it doesn't smell of smoke! How *do* you manage that? for I see pipes among your other properties."

"Relics of my Cambridge days," answered Stephen. "I don't smoke now. I couldn't achieve every luxury when first we went to Devonshire, and there were others I preferred to tobacco."

To have given up smoking from poverty, gave Ruth an idea that the difficulty of getting money enough to live upon must indeed have been great; for she had a strong conviction that nothing but the direst necessity would extinguish the pipes and cigars of any of the young men with whom she was acquainted. Her face

betrayed the thought as it passed through her mind, and Stephen, with a slight flush and a laugh, answered the unspoken comment on his words.

"Don't waste any valuable sympathy on my useless attempts at self-denial, Miss Charteris. Boys always rush into extremes; and I was as ignorant and foolish as the rest. I was utterly without any sort of knowledge as to what money could be made to do, and fancied that we should have hardly enough for food and fuel. Of course I could have afforded to smoke if I had been less stupid; but by the time I had learned sense, I had ceased to care about it, and preferred other indulgences to beginning again. These are the sketches Mrs. L'Estrange wished you to see," he added, opening a portfolio, "but they are not really worth showing. They are in the Black Forest. While my mother was at Wildbad this summer, I had nothing to do but to walk and fish and sketch, and, as I was glad of a change from our Dartmoor scenery, I made as many as I could. I did not know then that I should so soon have this country to work upon."

The drawings, whether finished or unfinished, were really good. Stephen was, as Ruth remembered that his mother had told her, a first-rate amateur artist, and she looked over them with genuine pleasure and admiration, entering with interest into all sorts of details, and lingering especially over one lovely view in the Murgthal. At last she remembered her promise to Daniel, and, looking up from the drawings, she said, with a little shyness,—

"I have been asked to make a request to you, Mr. Powys, which I hope you won't think me impertinent for consenting to do, and of course you will not feel obliged to grant it out of civility to me. I am only old Daniel's mouth-piece."

"You know I should be only too glad if there were anything I could do for you," was the reply. "But if Daniel's request is connected with my official work, I must warn you that to me business is always business."

"This concerns you personally," said Ruth, rather amused by his quick uncompromising answer. "And the request involves telling you a story."

She told him all that there was to tell, and as Stephen listened not only with attention from courtesy to her, but with quick sympathy for all concerned and especially for Joe himself and his father, Ruth saw that her request would be granted.

"Poor Polly died in London of typhoid fever a month or two ago," was the conclusion of her story. "Mr. Trevor was a weak, foolish boy, I fancy, but he had married her; and though his family were displeased and refused to help them, he was kind to her, and when she became hopelessly ill he sent for her aunt. It was very likely the best end for her, poor girl, for they could never have been happy together; but it was very sad, and I dare say this news soon after he went to his new place has hindered Joe from settling there happily. He is weak, but he is really a good boy and a well-trained servant; and if you don't mind trying him it will be a great kindness to his old father."

"Of course I will try him," said Stephen. "Only if he comes to me, Miss Charteris, he must do as I do myself, and turn his hand to anything that wants doing about the place. However, I'll talk to Daniel about it and see what can be done. You think that Mrs. L'Estrange will not dislike his returning to the neighborhood?"

"I am sure she will not, for Frank's feeling of compassion and consideration for Joe was so strong that I know she will wish to do what he would have done if he had

lived ; but I will speak to her about it this evening, and unless you hear from me to-morrow that she objects to the plan, you will know that she does not. It is very kind of you to have heard me so patiently and to be willing to have him."

Ruth turned to leave the room as she spoke, and she went back to the drawing-room ; while Stephen, with characteristic promptitude, went out to the stable to speak to Daniel.

A little later, as he put the two ladies into the carriage, Mrs. L'Estrange said—

"I am glad I remembered to make you show your drawings to Miss Charteris, as she admired them so much. I wonder you do not frame more of them for the walls of your rooms. The two or three that are hanging up are charming ; but it is a pity to waste all the rest in portfolios."

"I frame them as fast as I have time to make the frames," replied Stephen. "But I have no more than those you saw to-day. The portfolios don't exist, really."

All was ready for starting, and, after a few more friendly words from Mrs. L'Estrange and a smile from Ruth, Stephen watched them drive away.

"Mrs. Powys told me that he has sold all his drawings as fast as he could do them," said Ruth. "He had great difficulty in making her as comfortable as her health required."

"I like him better each time I see him," replied Mrs. L'Estrange. "His cheerful independence is very refreshing, and his energy amuses me. As long as our wills do not clash, I could not desire a better agent ; but I don't know what would happen if we took different views of anything, for he is quick and positive."

Ruth laughed.

"He would tell you rather bluntly that you were wrong ; but, having told you so, he would consider it as your affair, not his, and would carry out your instructions with business-like and provoking accuracy, and allow you to take the consequences."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE next three months of the closing year passed quickly, and were filled with such stir and gayety as a country life in the autumn and winter usually affords. The different houses in the county all entertained large parties for shooting ; there was a Hunt Ball in November and the first of the annual Subscription Balls in December ; and Ruth Charteris was sure to be included in every gathering of the kind. The cheerfulness of the winter, too, was greatly increased by the Kennedys being unexpectedly settled near Edenford.

Colonel Kennedy, thanks to merit and interest combined, was appointed to the command of the new military district of which Edenford was the centre, and, as Sir Everard depended greatly upon Agatha for both the comfort and enjoyment of his life, he had at once proposed to join them in taking a pleasant country-house a few miles out of Edenford (which was luckily then to be let), and thus to continue to live together.

It suited Agatha infinitely better to preside over a combined household (kept up on a scale which could not have been attempted without Sir Everard, but which was quite necessary for him) than to begin now to adapt herself to the style which her husband would have thought sensible and prudent had they been left to themselves.

The uncle and nephew were accustomed to living together, and were never in each other's way: to Sir Everard, indeed, Nigel was little less essential than Agatha, and, as she filled her part with unfailing tact and skill, everything went smoothly among them, and she might be said fairly to earn the life of luxury and amusement which she enjoyed so much.

It was a great pleasure to Ruth to have the Kennedys settled in the county and within easy reach. She valued her brother-in-law's friendship and society very highly, and Agatha's presence always made every gayety more enjoyable, for the one point on which they had seriously differed was no longer an open question, Ruth, in the course of the autumn, having refused the offer made to her at last by Mr. Allonby. Though she said nothing about it to any one herself, the fact was nevertheless very generally known. Such facts almost always are known, and Ruth was quite aware that this was no secret; but, as she herself was absolutely silent, no one could speak to her about it. It was a relief to her to have put an end to the affair, and, though she knew that her refusal was a disappointment and a mortification, she did not believe that it was much more. She was sorry to give any one even passing pain, but she was tolerably convinced that Mr. Allonby would be quite able to enjoy his winter in the East even though she had declined to accompany him, and that he would return in the spring free alike from resentment and regret.

She was a little surprised and very much relieved to find that neither her mother nor her sister made any remark or showed any disappointment. She supposed that they thought it useless to remonstrate, and could only be grateful for the forbearance which kept them silent.

In truth, the almost universal conclusion was that she

had refused Mr. Allonby for Leonard Barrington's sake. That Leonard's hopes for his own ultimate success should rise greatly in consequence was only natural, and he was going on so well and was so obviously gaining his aunt's confidence and affection that neither Mrs. Charteris nor Agatha thought it necessary to try to interfere any more. They saw every reason to be content with things as they were.

The only people who felt any doubt of Ruth's motives were Colonel Kennedy, Mrs. L'Estrange, and Mr. Powys. Colonel Kennedy perhaps could scarcely be said to doubt, for he knew that Ruth had freed herself from whatever tie had bound her to Leonard, and he did not think that she was likely to fall again under his influence. That he was working hard and steadily, doing everything in his power to win his place in the world, and making it very evident that he was doing it all for her sake, Colonel Kennedy could not doubt that Ruth felt; for Leonard was thoroughly in earnest, and, though his devotion to her was unobtrusive, it was absolute and unmistakable and could not fail to affect her. Nevertheless, Colonel Kennedy believed her to be safe, for he thought that her eyes had been opened once for all to the faults ingrained in Leonard's nature, and that even while he was trying hard to please her she was really learning to see more and more plainly how great had been her previous mistake.

She might rejoice that Leonard was doing well, she might be touched by his love for herself; but, even now, looks and tones and careless words in casual conversation in society constantly betrayed a narrowness of mind and poverty of heart to which she could never again be blind. This, at any rate, was Colonel Kennedy's view of the matter.

Mrs. L'Estrange was dimly aware of something of the

same kind; though, having no clue to the mystery, she could not quite make it out. That Leonard was at last steadily endeavoring to make the most of his life and to retrieve his past errors (as far as she knew them) was a great comfort and pleasure to her; she had begun to look forward confidently to a happy ending to the whole affair at no very distant time, when she first perceived that though Leonard was more anxious and eager than ever in his pursuit of Ruth—more really absorbed in his love for her—she was decidedly changed, and was gently but persistently withdrawing herself from him.

That Leonard was not and never could be really worthy of Ruth, Mrs. L'Estrange had always felt, but he had become very dear to her lately; she ardently desired his happiness, and that would be best secured by such a marriage; she longed to have Ruth as her daughter to succeed her at Throstlethwaite, and she saw with regret that they were drifting apart.

Whatever might have been the motive for Ruth's reported refusal of Mr. Allonby (and probably there was none but the fact that she did not care for him), she feared that it was not her love for Leonard, for that seemed to be passing away even while he was at last striving to make himself more worthy of it. It was a puzzle to Mrs. L'Estrange, and a painful one, but she admitted to herself that Ruth was really wiser now in withholding her love than she had been before in giving it.

Stephen Powys was undoubtedly in a better position than any one else for forming a correct opinion of the state of things. He knew more of the facts than even Colonel Kennedy; but then he was scarcely so dispassionate an observer.

During the three months which had passed since he came to Kester's Hill, he had mixed more in society than

he had done for many years previously. Mrs. L'Estrange, with a kind wish to restore him to his natural position, had taken care to give him one or two introductions which secured his admission into the best society that the country afforded.

A young man with good looks and pleasant manners easily wins his way in a country neighborhood, where gentlemen are usually in a minority, and he was soon well known and popular. He had thus plenty of opportunities of meeting Ruth, and was quite aware of all that county gossip had to say about her affairs.

The necessity of finding some "reason" for her refusal of Mr. Allonby, which seemed to be so universally felt, filled him with profound contempt. It was not likely that she should care for a man of that sort; and, if she did not, what further reason could be needed? He never spoke when the question was talked of; he never voluntarily mentioned her name; and his silence did not seem unnatural, for he was such a new acquaintance that no one supposed he could take much interest in the matter, or have any opinion about it; but when he heard Ruth thus discussed by all these people who had known her from her childhood, he always felt that, in spite of their tone of intimacy, their knowledge and comprehension of her was nothing compared with his.

Nevertheless, he could not satisfy himself as to what she really felt for Leonard. That she had broken off for the time whatever engagement or understanding had previously existed between them, he did not doubt; but he could not feel sure that she might be able to withstand all his persevering efforts to win her back again. She had really loved him; he must therefore have *some* power over her still; and Stephen, though hating and despising him, was constrained to admit that he had many qualities which

might help to make his present eager pursuit of her successful, while he would have every assistance that the wishes of friends on both sides, and the most brilliant worldly prospects, could give. Would it end in Ruth being once more deceived into believing in him? The idea of such a thing being possible was intolerable to Stephen, though, as he told himself often enough, it was no business of his. Whatever he might have done had he been in a more independent position, he was quite aware that as things were now he had no right to try to win Ruth for himself. He had absolutely nothing but his salary, and no prospect of ever having anything except what he could make or save for himself.

Marriage with any girl in Ruth Charteris's position must be out of the question for him for years, and whatever might be his feeling for her it must be kept to himself. He could not ask her to be his wife; therefore he had no right to make her conscious of his love for her and so add to her troubles; and that settled the matter.

The resolution was prudent, sensible, and unselfish; but, though Stephen so far adhered to it that he discouraged his mother from asking Ruth to Kester's Hill, as she wished to do in the early part of the winter, and when he met her elsewhere steadily resisted the temptation to engross her attention even as much as he felt that she would willingly have allowed, it was perhaps fortunate for his consistency that a totally unexpected piece of luck suddenly released him from the restrictions he had thus imposed upon himself.

Just before the end of the year he succeeded to the property of an eccentric old lady, a very distant cousin, of whose existence he had never even heard until her lawyer wrote to tell him of her death without a will, and of his having been made out to be her "nearest of kin."

Stephen investigated the matter, found that there were really no nearer relations and no one with any better claim than his to what she had to leave, and then thankfully accepted his unexpected inheritance. It was not much of a fortune, but it made all the difference in the world to him at this moment to find himself the owner of between five and six thousand pounds instead of nothing.

He knew well enough that in the eyes of most "parents and guardians" the difference would appear almost imperceptible when the marriage of any girl like Ruth Charteris was in question, and he was quite aware that her family had ambitious views for her individually; but he did not see that he need concern himself about that, or consider their prejudices.

Ruth was no heiress. Her fortune, as one of the six younger children of a man of moderate wealth, must be small, and, though her friends might assume that her personal attractions entitled them to expect a brilliant marriage for her, in Stephen's opinion that was "rubbish." In his own eyes the possession of this money justified him in marrying if he chose; and the question of whether he should do so or not must depend simply on Ruth herself.

He was not going to trouble himself about what any one else might think. He knew Ruth well enough to be sure that if he could once win her love she would not shrink from comparative poverty, or wish for luxuries which he could not give her.

Whether he could win her or not might be very doubtful, but he considered that he had now the right to try, and that if he could succeed he should be justified in utterly disregarding the disappointment to her family. His success or failure might be everything to him; it might be everything or it might be nothing to her; but,

according to Stephen's views of the matter, it was a question to be decided by themselves absolutely, without reference to any one else. No objection could be made to him, he knew, except that of want of wealth; and if he could persuade Ruth herself to disregard that, no one could have any right to interfere.

The "if" which he did admit was a serious one, for, in spite of all his practical self-confidence, his estimate of himself was really humble enough; but still he felt that the love he could offer would be worth her taking; he was sure that he could make her happy if only he could induce her to trust herself to him, and he could not help hoping that it might be possible to do so.

"I shan't be back to-night, mother," he said early on New Year's day, as he was preparing to leave Kester's Hill. "I am going to stay at Throstlethwaite for a couple of nights."

"Is there a party there?" asked Mrs. Powys.

"No. It is not a twelvemonth yet since young L'Estrange's death. But there is to be a gathering on the ice to-day on Brideswater, and as I have to be at Throstlethwaite to-morrow for business as well as for the shooting, Mrs. L'Estrange has kindly asked me to stay there instead of coming back here. By the way, mother, she suggested something the other day about a Christmas-tree, or something of the sort, for the children about here. Do you think you would be up to it if we could get Miss Charteris to come over for a day or two and help you?"

Mrs. Powys smiled.

"As you and Miss Charteris would do it all, I cannot pretend not to be up to it, Stephen; but I thought you said, when I wanted to have her here before, that it wouldn't do to ask her,—that her people, you were sure, would not like her to come to us."

Stephen's laugh was scarcely quite unconscious, as he replied,—

“Oh, that was different! If she came for this sort of thing, it would be for the sake of being of use to Mrs. L'Estrange, and no one would think of objecting. Of course I should ask Mrs. L'Estrange to come also.”

Mrs. Powys looked a little alarmed.

“But, my dear Stephen, how could we make them both comfortable? I am so little used to company, and then we have so few servants; and what in the world should we do with theirs?”

“The rooms are right enough,” was Stephen's reply; “or, if there is anything wanted, it is easily managed; and there isn't a better cook in the county than old Barbara, or a handier parlor-maid than little Phyllis; while as for a hostess, what more could they want than you,—if only you won't be frightened? Seriously, mother, I think Mrs. L'Estrange would like to come; and if she brings Miss Charteris with her you need not be anxious about them; you can't call two quiet ladies company,—and you like them both, you know.”

To this Mrs. Powys assented; and she agreed, further, that if Stephen and Barbara could manage the necessary arrangements she should rather enjoy having visitors. It was therefore settled that Stephen should find out if Mrs. L'Estrange would like to come, and, if she would, that he should get her to fix a day which would also suit Miss Charteris.

With this understanding, he set off to Throstlethwaite to join the rest of the world on the frozen lake; and his mother watched him go, and rejoiced to know that at last social pleasures had again found their place in his life. The one thing she had now to wish for was that he should marry; and in theory, at any rate, she was fully prepared

to leave him whenever that should happen. It was of no use, she feared, to think of Miss Charteris, charming though she was; for Mrs. Powys knew that she was commonly supposed to be, to all intents and purposes, engaged to Mr. Barrington; while, even if that were not true, her friends would never consent to such a poor marriage for her as one with Stephen must necessarily be. In that case, was it wise for him to see too much of her? With a prudence which as usual was far behind the real necessities of the case, Mrs. Powys resolved to observe them carefully when this proposed visit should take place, and if she then thought that Stephen's peace was in any danger, to give him some gentle hint of warning.

She thought herself very wise and far-seeing in thus anticipating remote possibilities, quite unconscious that Stephen, on his way to Brideswater, was quietly determining that Ruth Charteris should be his wife some day, if patience and devotion could win her,—or, if not Ruth, then no one.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THERE was a gay gathering that morning on Brideswater. It was a rare and unexpected pleasure to have the lake as completely and safely frozen, and the ice in such perfect condition, as it was on that New Year's day, and Mrs. L'Estrange had offered luncheon at Throstlethwaite to any of her friends who liked to come over from a distance to enjoy at once the opportunity of skating and the marvelous beauty of the scenery in its present state of glittering ice and snow.

Leonard Barrington had a few days' holiday, and was consequently at home, and the party had been hurriedly made chiefly for his pleasure. For his sake, Mrs. L'Estrange wished to make an effort to begin to mix in society again ; and this was an easy and informal sort of entertainment, which she did not feel to be beyond her strength, for it had no special associations with Frank, as it was several years since the lake had been frozen in the same way. She wished to make Leonard's Christmas holiday cheerful and pleasant to him, for she knew that he had refused one or two rather tempting invitations for the same time, in order to spend it with her ; and she desired also to show the growing confidence and approbation which his whole conduct since Frank's death appeared to her to justify.

Two more of his sisters had married in the course of the autumn. They were all pleasant, good-natured girls, commonplace, but pretty and unaffected ; and, as neither they themselves, nor their friends for them, were at all fastidious or exacting, the four elder ones had married in quick succession, much to the satisfaction of every one concerned. The youngest one only now remained at home,—a girl of eighteen, who was less good-looking than her sisters, and was delicate as well as dull. She and her mother were now staying at Throstlethwaite for a few days (as a matter of kindness and duty on Mrs. L'Estrange's part), and so also were Ruth Charteris and her eldest brother, Edgar, who was Leonard's special friend in the family.

Ruth would unquestionably much have preferred remaining at home ; but it would not have been easy, scarcely even possible, to do so without making explanations and giving reasons which she had neither the right nor the wish to give ; and therefore she went without

protest, prepared to endure whatever might be painful, and to make the best of it.

A gathering of gentlemen for pheasant-shooting had been for some time arranged for the second day of the year; but this skating party on New Year's day was necessarily more unpremeditated. For these two days Colonel Kennedy and Stephen Powys were also to be in the house,—neither of them guests whom Leonard would have invited had the choice been left to him; but Mrs. L'Estrange had not consulted him on that point, though she had given him full permission to ask any friends he pleased, either to skate or shoot.

It was disagreeable to him to see more of Stephen Powys than he could help, and he had an instinctive feeling that Colonel Kennedy did not like him; but, on the whole, he was too well satisfied with the position which his aunt was silently allowing him to take in her home, and too much pleased to have Ruth staying there as the one lady guest,—to whom it was his obvious duty to devote himself,—to feel inclined to grumble at anything.

A sharp frost, with brilliant sunshine and a perfectly still air, made as faultless a winter's day as it was possible to desire, and Mrs. L'Estrange's sudden invitations had been readily responded to, so that there were young people from nearly every family in the county on Brideswater that day.

Stephen Powys by this time knew them all more or less well, and the prospect of the day's holiday to be spent in cheerful society and active out-door amusement was very pleasant to him, quite apart from all special plans connected with Ruth. When he reached Throstlethwaite he found one or two business letters waiting for him, which he had desired should be addressed to him there, as he expected to have to consult Mrs. L'Estrange about them

before they could be answered. He went into the library to attend to them, but, finding their contents different from what he had expected, he walked off at once to the lake, where every one else had already gone.

The scene there was most picturesque. There was no snow in the valley or on the lower hills, but the higher ranges were the purest white, glittering in the bright sunshine; while the lake, having frozen quickly when the air was quite still, was like a large mirror, sharply reflecting the leafless trees and gray rocks and the snow-covered mountains.

There was a terrace walk by the lake, near Riddell's Wood, and on this were congregated all the party who had not yet gone on the ice, which, however, was already sprinkled over with skaters of every degree of awkwardness and proficiency.

Mrs. L'Estrange turned from Colonel Kennedy, to whom she was speaking at the moment, and greeted Stephen cordially.

"Your first winter favors you, Mr. Powys," she said. "You must not imagine, though, that we often succeed in being so picturesquely Arctic as this."

"I am fortunate in seeing it, then," was the reply; "for I certainly never saw anything more beautiful than it is."

"And I don't suppose you ever had a chance of such skating!" exclaimed Ruth, coming up to the bank at the moment. "It is the oddest sensation, at first, to go about upon ice so transparent; but when once you get over that, it is absolutely perfect. You are coming on, Nigel, are you not?"

"Yes, — in a moment," replied Colonel Kennedy. "But you have no skates with you, Powys, I see," he added. "Are you not going to join us?"

"Oh, don't you skate, Mr. Powys?" cried Ruth, before he could answer. "What a pity! But you will try, will you not?"

"I like skating particularly, Miss Charteris," he replied, "and that splendid sheet of ice is a horrible temptation, I assure you; but I am afraid I have no time to-day."

"But everybody in these regions takes a holiday on New Year's day!" protested Ruth. "Don't they, Mrs. L'Estrange?"

"Indeed they do," said Mrs. L'Estrange. "Ruth is quite right, Mr. Powys. Leave business till to-morrow, and make holiday to-day, like the rest of the world. If you have not brought your skates with you, Leonard will find you some, I am sure; and, really, I want as many gentlemen as possible to look after all these adventurous young ladies."

A sign from her brought Leonard to the shore by Ruth's side; but before Mrs. L'Estrange could say why she had summoned him, Stephen spoke with his usual quick decision:

"Thanks. But my own skates are up at the house. I fully intended to have had a day on the ice, Mrs. L'Estrange, but I find from these letters that I must really go up to Thornbeck. That man Miller will be there for a few hours to-day, I hear, and I must not miss the chance of seeing him."

"Do not you think writing will do as well?" said Mrs. L'Estrange, who was reluctant to see him deprive himself of his holiday. "I should be quite satisfied, I assure you."

"But I should not," replied Stephen. "Don't tempt me to shirk taking so obvious a precaution. It will make a good deal of difference whether we really get the right sort of man as clerk of the works for all the building at

Kester's Hill this spring, and I can judge infinitely better if I see him myself. I shall go up by the next train in half an hour, and then I shall walk back as far as the head of the lake, skate down to join you, and so have an hour or two on the ice, after all."

"It will be your only chance, I am afraid," said Leonard, "for the glass is going down fast."

"So I see," replied Stephen. "I shall come back as soon as I can; but I must go."

"I am very sorry," said Mrs. L'Estrange. "I wanted you to have a free day; and I still think that, as we had no reason to suppose it would be possible for you to see the man, you might be content to write,—especially as I make the suggestion myself and am willing to be held responsible for the consequences."

Stephen laughed. "I don't quite see what difference that would make, for you could not save me the trouble which getting an incompetent man would cause. You are very kind, Mrs. L'Estrange, but I must really do my work in my own way; and that is, to be off to Thornbeck at once."

"Well," she replied, "I can only hope that it is something less of a sacrifice to you than it would be to most of these idle young men; though, even then, I am sorry that you think it necessary."

It was more of a sacrifice than she thought; but it was amply repaid, for, while Mrs. L'Estrange and Leonard turned to speak to some new arrivals, Ruth suddenly said, looking up at Stephen with a smile,—

"I am not going to tease you to stay now, Mr. Powys, because of course you know best about that; but do try to come back early, for I want you to see the sunset from the ice. It was wonderfully beautiful yesterday, and I hoped then that it would repeat itself for you to-day."

It was flattering, undoubtedly, even though it was said with perfect unconsciousness, and the evident pleasure which the words and manner gave was rather a startling revelation to Colonel Kennedy, who was standing by.

"I shall be back as early as possible," Stephen said, "but I must be off now if I am to catch the train."

As he turned to leave the shore, he suddenly faced the party of people just arrived. He knew the Merediths a little, but was passing them with only a recognition, when a middle-aged gentleman with them claimed his attention.

"Mr. Powys, surely!" he exclaimed. "The last man I should have thought of coming across down in this part of the world! I am delighted to see you! Staying here, of course? I suppose you and Barrington struck up a permanent alliance after your rather sensational introduction to each other last spring in London. Well, you did us all a good turn that evening, I must say!"

The two Miss Merediths had by this time passed on to join their friends on the ice, so that the group left together now consisted only of Mrs. L'Estrange and Colonel Kennedy, Stephen Powys and Mr. Anderson standing on the terrace, with Ruth and Leonard on the ice just below them. Mr. Anderson was one of those cheerful, voluble, loud-voiced men, overflowing with indiscriminating friendliness and good will, whose cordiality is as tactless as it is irrepressible.

He knew Stephen very slightly indeed; but, as it was always a necessity to him to say a great deal, he naturally enlarged upon their last meeting, and would have gone on in the same strain had not Stephen taken the matter into his own hands and interrupted him, not uncourtously, but too decidedly to be resisted.

"You are surprised to find me here, Mr. Anderson, I

see, and I had no idea that you had any connection with this country: so that it is quite an unexpected pleasure to meet you. But your guess as to me is quite wrong. My being here is simply a matter of business, and has nothing to do with the circumstances you are alluding to. I have had the good luck to become Mrs. L'Estrange's agent, and am now settled in this country."

"Ah, yes. Of course. I'm delighted to hear it," was the reply. "Charming arrangement for everybody. Most natural under the circumstances. Of course Barrington must have wished——"

"Excuse me," Stephen said, rather abruptly, "but I have to catch a train, and must lose no time in going to the station." And the next moment he had turned away, without even another glance at Ruth, and was walking quickly towards the house.

Mr. Anderson was at the same moment happily silenced by an imperious summons from his two nieces to go and help them to put on their skates. He obeyed with ready good nature. It had all happened very quickly, and at first an awkward silence followed in the group still left together.

Mrs. L'Estrange had observed with surprise and displeasure the effect of Mr. Anderson's words. Ruth's color had suddenly flushed and faded, and she had looked nervously at Leonard and Stephen alternately. Stephen was obviously annoyed, and anxious to stop further revelations, while Leonard looked embarrassed and uneasy. Colonel Kennedy had watched the scene with considerable interest, though it only suggested to him a few more details than he had previously known, and he wondered how Leonard would get out of the difficulty.

Mrs. L'Estrange spoke the first.

“What is all this mystery, Leonard? What was Mr. Anderson alluding to? Did not you and Mr. Powys meet here for the first time this summer?”

She evidently intended to be answered, and Leonard scarcely dared even pause to consider what he had better say. He was thankful that Stephen had left the matter to him; but, with Ruth standing by him and evidently not intending to leave him, he could not venture to garble the truth, as he might have done had he been alone with his aunt.

He was, however, ready-witted, and he instinctively felt that apparent frankness was his only chance, for if he did not satisfy her completely she would certainly seek explanation from Stephen. Colonel Kennedy naturally moved away as Mrs. L'Estrange spoke to Leonard, but Ruth shook her head in reply to his look inviting her to accompany him. She felt herself necessary as a restraint on Leonard's powers of self-exculpation.

Remembering his insinuations about Stephen in his letter to herself in the summer, she stayed resolutely by his side, to enforce at any rate a sufficient approach to truth to insure justice.

To stand perfectly still on skates for any length of time is troublesome and difficult, especially when the conversation is one requiring both caution and dexterity.

Absorbed in the subject, Ruth and Leonard were both instinctively leaning on the same chair to assist themselves in keeping steady; but even in the short pause before he spoke, she was more vividly conscious than ever before of the entire separation between them which was proved by her present feeling towards him. She felt shame and pain, but neither hope nor confidence. She was not staying by his side to encourage or to comfort, but simply that her presence might oblige him to speak, if not the whole

truth, at any rate nothing but the truth. There was but a moment's silence, and then Leonard spoke, not quite easily, perhaps, but with wonderfully little constraint.

"It isn't an easy question to answer, Aunt Margaret,—at least, I must say both 'yes' and 'no' to it. We certainly did meet one evening when I was in London in May, but we were not aware of each other's identity until all that explanation in the summer. If Powys had known who I was then, of course no misunderstanding would have been possible."

"Mr. Anderson seemed to assume that you knew each other," said Mrs. L'Estrange. "He spoke of a 'sensational introduction' between you."

"Jack Anderson's tongue always goes faster than his discretion," said Leonard. "However, we *were* introduced, as it happened; but *I* had heard in the morning from Mr. Hillyer that Stephen Powys was in America, and *he* had heard of me from the same muddle-headed authority only as your nephew, and had concluded that my name was L'Estrange: therefore we did not make each other out at the time; and, as the meeting was quite accidental, we heard no more of each other until August."

"I still do not see why there should have been any mystery about it," said Mrs. L'Estrange. "Why did you meet as strangers, and never mention that you had met before? Why did Mr. Powys so evidently try to stop Mr. Anderson just now? There must be something he did not wish me to know; and there are few things more distasteful to me than petty mysteries of this kind. Whatever the secret may be, it lowers my opinion of him; and I wish that you had not been a party to it."

Leonard felt sure that if he did not speak Ruth would, and therefore he lost no time in taking the matter into his own hands, conscious that unless he could contrive to

tell his own story so as to satisfy both his aunt and Ruth, it would be told for him infinitely to his disadvantage.

"There is not much of a secret, Aunt Margaret," he said, "but, such as it is, it is mine quite as much if not more than his; and, at any rate, its being made into a secret was entirely my doing. There are *some* things in everybody's life, I should think, which they shrink from making known to those whose opinion they care most about; and the occasion of our meeting was one of them. When I was in London for those few days, I went one night with some friends to a meeting,—a sort of club. Powys came there too, like myself for the first time, and it was a place where neither of us would ever wish to go again. I am as sure of that with him as with myself. There was very high play going on, and I was tempted to join, in the insane hope of winning enough to pay off my debt at Hamburg. I lost something, but not nearly so much as I should have done if Powys had not detected one fellow in cheating. There was a row: it was a low, horrid sort of business, and I am sure disgusted us both equally, and cured us of any wish ever to repeat such an experiment. We had met quite unaware of our having any sort of connection together, and we heard nothing more of each other till he came down here in August. Then, of course, we knew that we had met before. But—it wasn't wise, Aunt Margaret, I know, and perhaps it wasn't right—but I could not endure the idea of telling you of my folly, and forfeiting the better opinion which I hoped I was at last obtaining. I thought you would think even more of it than it deserved,—gambling is such an ugly word,—and I asked Powys to say nothing of our ever having met. I don't think he liked it, though of course he consented, and, at any rate, you have nothing to blame *him* for. He did not even play when he was

there: he only looked on, and, as Anderson said, did us all a good turn. It was foolish of me to make the mystery, but I don't think it was unnatural. I hated the idea of displeasing you or giving you pain; and just not to speak seemed so easy. Now you know all about it, and you see that the blame, whatever there is, must fall on me entirely."

The situation was a difficult one, and Leonard had certainly met it well as far as tact and skill were concerned. His manner was good, and his explanation gave his aunt the impression of being simple and straightforward, as if he had spoken out frankly as soon as keeping his secret seemed to involve a reflection on any one else, while his really genuine nervous embarrassment produced the effect of feeling and sensitiveness. That he was not telling the whole truth never occurred to her, for what had really happened would have appeared to her incredible; and his ready frankness now raised him in her opinion much more than the facts of his confession lowered him. She answered, gravely, but very kindly, as soon as he ceased speaking,—

"That night's lesson seems to have been cheaply bought, Leonard; and yet it will be effectual, I hope; but it is all past long ago, and we will not dwell upon it now. Mysteries are always foolish and useless, and I should have been better pleased to have known the truth at first; but perhaps, as you say, it was not unnatural to be silent about it, and, at any rate, it is amply atoned for by your frank blame of yourself now, and your ready defense of Mr. Powys. There may have been something to censure in the past, but prompt truth and justice cover a multitude of sins. Now, I don't want all this to spoil your day's pleasure. Let us forget it, and go off with Ruth to enjoy yourself on the ice."

Leonard made only some slight and rather incoherent reply; but even in that short moment Ruth was gone without waiting for him, and had joined Colonel Kennedy far out in the bay. She was much the best skater among the ladies present that day, and Leonard was unquestionably the most skillful of the gentlemen: they had always particularly delighted in skating together ever since they were children, and Mrs. L'Estrange was rather surprised at this sudden avoidance of him.

It had given her pleasure to see Ruth remain so steadily by Leonard's side during the last few minutes, as if she admitted that to be her place and was ready to share his troubles; and she had hoped that the frank confession made so simply and readily would impress her as favorably as it had herself. This sudden flight puzzled her; but she hoped that it meant only an embarrassing consciousness of how much interest in him she had shown by her previous anxiety and agitation, and not a growing perception of those weak points in his character to which she had so long apparently been blind. At any rate, Mrs. L'Estrange decided not to speak to her on the subject afterwards, feeling that she ought to be allowed to come to a knowledge of her own real feelings without any external pressure or persuasion.

Colonel Kennedy asked no questions, and Ruth made no remark, when she joined him on the ice, but he saw clearly enough, from all that passed during the rest of the day, that, whatever the difficulty might have been, if Leonard had got over it to his own satisfaction and his aunt's he had not done so to that of Ruth, who persistently avoided every chance of his speaking to her apart. Colonel Kennedy had not much curiosity as to the details of the story. He guessed it accurately enough to understand Ruth's feeling, and he was glad that she should

have freed herself so completely from Leonard's influence; for his superficial attractions of appearance and manner, and his commonplace cleverness, had naturally never blinded *him* to his deficiencies.

The discovery of Stephen Powys's feelings for Ruth had been rather a shock to Colonel Kennedy; for, unworldly and "romantic" though his wife always called him, he knew perfectly well into what a labyrinth of trouble such an attachment must probably lead them if it should be mutual. It was certainly not *that* at present, and he doubted whether Ruth had yet even perceived its existence on Stephen's side; but he thought them singularly well suited to each other, and he knew that Ruth liked him thoroughly.

It was a bold venture, no doubt, on Stephen's part, to try for Ruth; but Colonel Kennedy rather respected the courage which prompted him to disregard the serious obstacles in the way of success, and he made up his mind that he for one would not try to hinder it. With the one exception of his want of money, Stephen was more worthy of Ruth than any one he knew, as well as more likely to win her; and with his vigor and energy and right-mindedness, and her good sense, the question of poverty was one which they might fairly be trusted to decide for themselves.

Colonel Kennedy resolved, therefore, to keep his own counsel, and not to give the alarm to those to whom such an idea would appear so simply preposterous as to justify almost any antagonistic measures.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE day went on merrily. There was luncheon at the house for every one ; then more skating ; and, late in the afternoon, tea and coffee were made in picnic fashion in the boat-house before the party broke up. By four o'clock all had dispersed. Several detachments had a long drive before them, and, with slippery roads and no moon, dared not be too late in starting ; while others had to take the train at Otter's Bridge.

Edgar Charteris and Colonel Kennedy had gone across the ice to the station with the large party who were going by train, Mrs. L'Estrange and Mrs. Barrington were indoors, and Leonard had walked down to the lodge with the two last sets of people whose carriages were waiting for them there.

Ruth and Miss Barrington were thus left alone on the ice in Throstlethwaite Bay. Mrs. L'Estrange had suggested that it was getting late, and that they had better go in ; but, in the face of the "horrid thaw" which the rapidly-falling barometer declared to be impending, they could not bear to relinquish even that last half-hour of lingering daylight, and were amusing themselves very well until they should be joined again by the gentlemen who had gone to see their friends off on their way home.

A change of weather might be coming,—weather-wise people said it would rain before the morning—but such signs of it as were yet visible only increased the beauty of the sunset, and Ruth, as she watched it, wished that Mr.

Powys had returned in time to see it. The light had already left the valley and lake, and even the lower hills, but the higher ones, with their pure covering of snow, were as lovely for the moment, in the rosy glow upon them, as any of their grander Alpine rivals. The sky was still, on the whole, unusually clear, and every outline was strongly defined; but towards the west it was crossed by several straight, narrow lines of cloud, sharply drawn, as if by a ruler. For the few moments when the sunset light fell upon them, half the sky seemed to be barred with crimson, and the effect was repeated in the clear mirror of ice beneath her feet, though in somewhat dimmer coloring.

Ruth forgot everything in her pleasure and admiration; but she was suddenly recalled to a remembrance of the prosy realities of life by a pettish exclamation from Sophy Barrington, who, caring not at all for picturesque effects, had been amusing herself by playing with and teasing her dog. She had brought it on the ice in her arms because it would not follow her there voluntarily, and had then put it down and tried to make it run about after pieces of biscuit. It was a spoiled, timid little Maltese dog, and was both frightened and willful.

Its mistress was foolish and thoughtless, and, to show it where she had thrown a biscuit, she flung her muff in the same direction. Carlo was accustomed to play with the muff; he went after it, and dragged it on with him some way farther from where the girls were standing near the middle of the bay. There he dropped it for the biscuit, and, finding himself not very far from the shore near Ashness Point, which ran a good way out into the lake, he scampered off the ice with his prize, and stood at the edge, barking, deaf to all remonstrances. In vain Sophy called him. It was perfectly evident that if she

meant to have her muff she must fetch it herself ; and she set off in that direction.

"Take care where you go, Sophy !" Ruth called, as soon as she realized what was going on. "The ice is very weak somewhere there. Ashness Beck comes in there, and the waterfowl kept a hole open for a while, I know, after the rest of the bay was frozen."

"Oh, it's all right," returned Sophy. "The ice is quite perfect everywhere within sight."

"As if sight had anything to do with it ! Little idiot !" muttered Ruth, impatiently, to herself, as she followed Sophy, who skated willfully on, in open disregard of the warning.

Sophy Barrington was a not very amiable specimen of a spoiled child. She was the youngest, and had always had rather bad health ; consequently she had been petted and indulged by her mother and her elder sisters, and was lamentably untrained, both morally and mentally. Quick enough to be conscious that she was not popular now that she was grown up, it made her irritable and jealous. She resented Ruth's position at Throstlethwaite, and was on the defensive against any appearance of assumption of a better knowledge of the place or people than her own. Ruth's well-meant warning as to the state of the ice only made her defiant. She did not believe that it was really dangerous anywhere, and she did not choose that Ruth should interfere with her.

She skated on smoothly enough till she reached her muff and picked it up ; then, alarmed by a couple of sharp cracks in quick succession, and by the obvious thinness of the ice immediately in front of her, she turned quickly to retreat ; but, striking her foot against a stick frozen into the ice, which in the fading light she had not seen, she lost her balance and fell, too suddenly

to make even an attempt to save herself. The thin ice gave way at once under the shock of her whole weight falling upon it, and she went through into the water.

Ruth was only a little way behind, and it did not take her many seconds to reach the spot where Sophy's scarlet shawl was still visible. Ruth herself knew the lake thoroughly: a glance told her as she approached that Sophy had fallen just in the line where the Ashness Beck flowed in, and where the stream, by causing the water to freeze more slowly, had enabled the wildfowl to keep an open space for some little time. The water could not be really deep there, she knew, and the current of the beck was not apparently strong enough to sweep Sophy on under the ice. Ruth therefore expected every moment to see her scramble to her feet and only need help to get out. Sophy, however, neither stirred nor answered when she was called, and Ruth could only conclude either that she had hurt herself in falling on the stones, or that the shock and fright had caused her to faint. There was no time to hesitate,—she could not be left under water,—and Ruth instantly plunged in after her through the breaking ice. The water, as she had expected, was not beyond her depth: it was only about four feet deep, and she was tall and strong. She freed Sophy's dress from the stones on which it had fortunately caught, and managed to raise her to her feet.

She had been so few moments in the water that she was not insensible (though she must soon have become so but for Ruth's help), and the air revived her in some degree, though she continued half stupefied and perfectly helpless.

The position was not pleasant. Ruth was able to keep her own footing by means of a large stone against which she leaned, and she could just manage to keep Sophy sup-

ported against her, but she could do no more. She could have scrambled out again herself without much difficulty by breaking away the thin ice near her, and could then have gone for help; but with Sophy so absolutely dependent upon her, and quite incapable of keeping her feet if left for a moment, she could do nothing but maintain her present position.

There was no danger of drowning,—at any rate, not so long as she retained power over her own limbs,—but the water was nearly up to her shoulders, and was horribly cold. To remain in it long might be fatal to Sophy, and if she herself were to be benumbed there might even be real danger to both of them. She called as loudly as she could, repeatedly, but no one was in sight anywhere; she could hardly hope to be heard; and if she were not, some time might pass before they would be missed.

Leonard might have gone back to the house without returning to the lake, or he might have gone across to join the others at Otter's Bridge, and the train, she knew, was late and had not yet passed the station. It was decidedly an uncomfortable prospect.

After the first excitement of the alarm and the active exertion of rushing to the place and raising Sophy out of the water was over, the time seemed frightfully long,—each passing second was like an hour,—but in reality in only two or three minutes after Sophy's fall, help appeared.

Stephen Powys had been delayed in Thornbeck, and was much later than he had wished to be in returning. He had fulfilled his intention of walking back as far as the head of the lake, but, remembering that he did not know it well, and was ignorant of its springs and hidden dangers, he had thought it more prudent, being alone, to keep rather close to the shore. The various headlands

inclosing the bays had prevented him from seeing what was happening, as well as from being seen ; but, most fortunately, he was crossing the bay next above Throstlethwaite when he first heard Ruth's calls for help, and another minute or two sufficed to bring him round Ashness Point and close to where the two girls were.

"Don't come too near!" Ruth cried as he approached them. "Go between us and the shore, and then come as close to us as you can without getting in. There isn't any danger ; I am not out of my depth ; but Miss Barrington cannot help herself at all, so I cannot get her out."

Stephen realized the position at a glance. He came between them and the shore, and found that on that side the ice would bear him at a very short distance from the hole.

"Manage to hold her up for another minute, Miss Charteris, and I'll get a stick or something from the shore, and break the ice for you to where I am standing. Then I can get you both out quite easily."

Ruth was by this time very tired, as well as thoroughly chilled ; but she saw that he was right, and said so, adding,—

"And take your skates off, so as to be ready to carry her home at once. She is so delicate that every moment is of consequence."

Stephen was quick and vigorous. He was back instantly with a heavy stone, which enabled him to break away the unsafe ice. While he did so, Ruth hastily explained what had happened. The ice broken, Ruth threw one end of Sophy's shawl to Stephen, having twisted the other round her own arm. This enabled him to steady her as she moved and dragged Sophy with her till they were close to him. Even then it was not easy for them to raise her and get her out of the water, for, though not absolutely

unconscious, she had no power over her limbs, and was a dead weight in their hands.

At length Stephen managed to lift her in his arms.

"I'll take her safe to the shore first, and then come back to help you,—if it is necessary," he said; "but I think you can easily get out by yourself, now, almost before I can come back; and every moment's delay——"

"Don't wait," said Ruth, quickly. "I can quite manage by myself now."

He hurried away without another word, carrying Sophy, and leaving Ruth to take care of herself.

It was only a few yards to the shore, but walking on smooth slippery ice with a heavy burden required all Stephen's attention and took some little time. Looking back as soon as he reached the shore, he saw that Ruth was already out of the water and was standing safely on the firm ice. There was therefore no need to return to her or even to wait for her, and to get Miss Barrington home as soon as possible was clearly the right thing to be done next.

Hastily calling out to Ruth, "As you are all right, I will lose no time in getting her home," he turned away from the lake into the wood to find the path that would lead him to the house.

Ruth's good sense told her that Stephen was right; but it was impossible not to feel a little dreary and deserted when he so instantly obeyed her request not to wait for her, and walked away so unhesitatingly, leaving her there in the water to struggle out as best she could. There was no danger, certainly, and not much real difficulty, for the water was a good deal shallower where she then stood than where the accident had happened, and the ice was firm and thick.

The efforts she had had to make in lifting Sophy had

kept her blood in circulation, and, as Stephen saw, she soon scrambled out on the ice, and after that very quickly reached the shore. But though she was then safe enough, she was wretchedly uncomfortable, for it was rather dark and very cold as she stood there quite alone and wrung the water from her heavy woolen skirts and took off her skates for herself. Then she began to walk home ; but her feet were so chilled with standing in the water, and her wet dress was so heavy and clinging, that her movements at first were slow and almost painful.

She had some little distance to walk, and soon got on better ; but altogether it seemed a long time of solitary uncared-for discomfort,—the shock of the accident and the subsequent exertion and anxiety had shaken her a good deal,—and when she found herself quite close to the house, without any one even coming to meet her and see what was happening to her, the apparent indifference and neglect were almost more than she could bear, and she felt a childish inclination to cry, for which she hated herself, but which she could not altogether resist.

It was not until she overtook Stephen, just as he was entering the house, that she remembered what a serious labor he had undertaken. Sophy Barrington was small and slight and Stephen was big and strong, but to carry even a light woman for nearly half a mile is heavy work. He had had to rest more than once on his way from the lake, and thus Ruth, slow as her progress had seemed to herself, was at home as soon as he was. He had been thinking of her all the time, and wishing to get back to her assistance, but until he saw her face as they entered the lighted hall it had never occurred to him that his abrupt way of leaving her might have seemed inconsiderate.

There was no time now for explanations of any kind.

Mrs. L'Estrange and Mrs. Barrington were summoned, and the story hastily told. Sophy was carried to her room to be put to bed, and Ruth was sent to hers to make herself warm and dry, and to rest; and when the ladies had thus all disappeared, Stephen had nothing to do but to follow their example.

He was only a degree less wet than the two girls, so he went to dress at once, and spent the two hours before dinner sitting over his fire with a book, but in reality entirely occupied with the perception just come to him,—that to leave a young lady alone and almost in the dark, standing up to her waist in water in a hole in the ice, coolly telling her that he was sure she could easily get out by herself, and without a word of apology or regret, was scarcely likely to make a favorable impression on her mind.

“Of course I had to leave her,” he thought; “it was the only thing to be done, with that wretched little spoiled girl in such a state; but I suppose I ought to have said more about it.”

In truth, she had been so sensible and helpful and unaffected in the emergency that Stephen, as usual fully bent on doing the work in hand to the best of his power, had forgotten the possibility of her having any unreasonable feminine fancies or sensitiveness, and had treated her simply “*en camarade*,” as he might have done her brother Edgar.

The idea that he had annoyed her by his stupid want of courtesy—or, worse, hurt her by apparent indifference—was, however, intolerable to him, and he could only hope to have a chance of excusing himself in the course of the evening.

If Ruth had for a moment thought Stephen neglectful, she could not complain of the indifference of the rest of the party. Leaving Sophy Barrington to her mother's

care, Mrs. L'Estrange devoted herself to the pleasanter task of nursing and petting Ruth, who in vain protested that all she needed was dry clothes, and was inclined to rebel equally against hot wine-and-water and being sent to bed till dinner-time,—though, as Mrs. L'Estrange remained with her, she had not much ground for complaint.

The precautions were probably wise ; and, at any rate, Ruth appeared at dinner apparently none the worse for her cold bath, and quite able to give the comic side of the adventure in describing it to the other gentlemen, who were all chiefly anxious to be assured that *she* had not suffered in any way.

Their party was small, for Sophy Barrington was feverish and hysterical, and would not let her mother leave her ; but the dinner was cheerful and pleasant, and in the evening Ruth rather rejoiced to think that the reduced numbers must make it impossible to break into groups : she did not wish to be forced into the *tête-d-tête* for which she knew that Leonard had been trying all day.

In a long room, with its fireplace at one end, half a dozen people on a winter's evening were pretty sure to collect round it and to remain together, and Ruth felt herself perfectly safe when she was established with Mrs. L'Estrange at a small work-table on one side of the fire.

When the gentlemen joined them, all was much as she had expected. Colonel Kennedy took possession of a large arm-chair opposite to them ; Stephen drew a seat near Mrs. L'Estrange ; and Leonard and Edgar lounged against the chimney-piece. Everything that everybody said must necessarily be public property. It was comfortable and cheerful and safe.

But the whole arrangement was suddenly overthrown. Sophy Barrington was so delicate, and her mother so

anxious, that Mrs. L'Estrange had thought it desirable to send for the doctor to see her. He came rather late in the evening. Mrs. L'Estrange went up-stairs to take him to her niece's room. She stayed to hear his report herself, and her absence occasioned a general change.

"I wish we had Agatha here to sing to us!" Ruth said, by way of breaking the first silence which any sudden interruption is apt to cause.

"I am sorry she had to stay at home and miss the day on the ice," replied Colonel Kennedy. "She would have enjoyed it."

At the same time he could not help a passing thought that, for the sake of Ruth's own peace and comfort, Agatha was better employed in nursing her children through the measles than in making discoveries as to her sister's love affairs and then endeavoring to guide them.

The next moment he asked Leonard a question as to the whereabouts in the library of some curious old books of which Mrs. L'Estrange had been speaking at dinner, and, profiting by his hostess's absence, he walked off to look for them, leaving the younger people to amuse themselves. There was a billiard table in the hall, and Edgar Charteris, seeing no occasion to stand on any ceremony with his sister, suggested to Leonard that they should all go and play pool.

"The hall is far too cold for Ruth," was Leonard's instant reply. "How can you think of letting her go into such a draught-trap this evening? If you can't get through the time here, try to persuade Powys to have a game at billiards with you. I should think you were pretty evenly matched."

Edgar took the hint, which was tolerably broad; Stephen could not well refuse to go; and Ruth and Leonard were left together. She did not like it; but she had far

too much real dignity to make any attempt to escape, and waited quietly for what he might choose to say.

At first it was nothing very alarming. He produced a letter which he asked her to read, taking as he did so the seat on the other side of her little table which his aunt had just left. The letter was from the editor of a popular magazine, expressing satisfaction with one or two things he had written, and giving him the offer of undertaking a series of articles for which he named the subjects. One would be required each month for nearly the whole year.

It was undoubtedly flattering, and, under the circumstances, was a piece of great good luck ; but Ruth could not deny that such work of the kind as Leonard had yet done had been good in its way, and that he had fairly earned this success by the pains he had taken. She said something of the sort as she returned the note.

"Well, I *have* worked hard, and I mean to work hard," Leonard answered. "This is a great relief to me, Ruth. It means twenty guineas every month for the best part of the year ; and, with that help, I see my way to being quite clear of debt by the autumn. I expect to be able to tell Aunt Margaret that I am quite free not later than October ; and that hope is worth working for."

"I am sure she will be very glad," replied Ruth. "The shorter the time, the better pleased she will be."

She answered his words, but she did not look up from her work, and took no notice of all that he tried to say by look and tone.

Leonard took the hint for the moment, and proceeded to talk of the subjects with which he should have to deal. There was nothing personal in the discussion, and Ruth entered into it readily, growing eager and interested, and unconsciously falling into the tone of former days. At length the sound of voices in the hall disturbed them.

Dr. Barton was going away, and Mrs. L'Estrange would probably return in another moment. Leonard quickly closed the pocket-book in which he had been scribbling notes of Ruth's suggestions.

"Half of whatever success I obtain should be yours, Ruth," he said. "Far more than half, indeed; for you not only inspire me with the power to work, but you always supply the germ of all that is best in what I write."

She did not answer, and by her manner so distinctly refused to accept the position which he assigned to her that he forgot his prudence in momentary vexation, and, coming nearer to her, said, impetuously,—

"Ruth, you are very hard! Do you *never* mean to forgive and forget? Will you not even allow that I did the right thing this morning,—the best that was possible for everybody?"

"You got out of a difficulty very skillfully," was Ruth's reply.

"I took the whole blame. Ruth, you are not just. Did I not completely clear Powys?"

"Yes," Ruth answered, coldly. "You said enough for *that*, Leonard, I admit, or *I* should certainly have told the whole. I acknowledge, too, that you managed it so cleverly that the one omission you made in your story could injure no one,—*except yourself*. But why should we argue about it? We shall never see it with the same eyes: so let us agree not to allude to it again."

"You are right," he replied, quickly. "Never again! We have enough in common, Ruth, have we not, to allow of our putting aside one point of difference and forgetting it?"

Before Ruth could speak, Mrs. L'Estrange came in. Leonard remained unanswered, and there were no more private conversations that evening.

CHAPTER XXV.

WHEN every one assembled at breakfast the next morning, the report of Miss Barrington was that she had a feverish cold, with a good deal of rheumatism, and must keep her bed probably for several days. There was obviously no occasion to inquire after Ruth. She appeared as usual very punctually, and was evidently in no way the worse for the adventure.

The plan for the day among the gentlemen was to shoot in the woods on the opposite side of the lake in the forenoon,—the rendezvous for those in the house and those coming from a distance being at Otter's Bridge Station, at eleven. They were all to return to the house for luncheon about two, and to shoot in the park in the afternoon. There was an interval after breakfast before they started. Leonard and Edgar were excited and busy about all the arrangements, and had attention only for keepers and beaters. Mrs. L'Estrange was occupied with her household affairs. In the library, Colonel Kennedy was hastily writing a few letters on military business; Stephen was similarly employed in his own department; and Ruth had settled herself at a small table in one of the windows, which was always assigned to her for her drawing whenever she was at Throstlethwaite. Stephen finished his writing quickly, and on his way to put his letters in the box in the hall he passed near her table, where he seemed inclined to pause. She looked up and smiled, and spoke :

“ You are always so dreadfully busy, Mr. Powys, that

I suppose it is useless to ask if you have five minutes to spare?"

"I have nothing whatever to do until we start," Stephen replied, going up to the table at once. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Ruth laughed.

"Nothing requiring as much exertion as you had to make yesterday. I want to know if, after all, you *did* notice that sunset on the ice? Its beauty was nearly over before you joined us, I remember: so I hope you did."

"I saw it, most certainly, and have seldom seen anything so beautiful."

"I ask because I have been trying before breakfast this morning to make a sketch of it from memory. Of course it is all wrong, and it would be such a help if you would criticise it, and tell me how and why."

Stephen could not really have any doubt either of his own superior proficiency in the art, or of his being competent to give her very valuable instruction; and he professed none. He assumed that she wished for a candid opinion; and he gave one, passing over the merits of her drawing with the general remark, "You have a good eye, I see, and a good memory, too," and then giving himself up to the most outspoken demonstration of all its faults and weaknesses.

It was frank and sensible, but it was not flattering, and Colonel Kennedy, looking on from his position at the writing-table, was rather amused.

"If he means to carry that style throughout his love-making," he thought, "it is lucky for him that Ruth is so sensible. *She* may perhaps understand being wooed in that way, and not dislike it; but it would be a dangerous experiment with most young ladies, I should think."

Ruth did perhaps for a few moments look just a little

depressed by such a ruthless pulling to pieces of her work, which seemed at last to have no merits left ; but she saw the truth of what was said, and the few words she spoke were only to show that she did so, and to encourage Stephen to say all he had to say. When he had come to an end, she answered, with a smile, though a little ruefully,—

“It is great rubbish,—I see that ; but I am very fond of drawing, and one can get no good lessons in the country. I have had to do what I could by myself.”

“And you have done very well,” was the instant reply. “You would draw admirably with a very little help of the right sort. If you will let me, I think I could help you a little. I was very well taught myself by good artists, and I have worked at it a good deal since. I couldn’t have drawn that scene from memory half so correctly as you have done it ; but I have had so much practice that I could make a much better-executed picture of it than you could ; and, if you will lend me your sketch to copy, I will do my best to make one for you and to show you how I do it.”

Ruth accepted the offer very readily, and added,—

“I can’t draw out of doors at this time of year. I wonder if you would lend me some of your sketches to copy, and then pull my copies to pieces for me when there was an opportunity, as completely as you have done this thing?”

“I am afraid I have been very rude!” Stephen exclaimed, suddenly becoming aware of the bluntness of his criticisms.

Ruth laughed merrily.

“Very good-natured, rather, to take so much trouble over what was so little worth it. But you have not answered my cool request. My only way of thanking you for what you *have* done for me, you see, is to ask you to do more.”

"There could not be a better way," answered Stephen, quickly. "If you would really like it, I shall be only too glad; though my drawings are certainly not worth copying. Still, it might help you a little, while you cannot sketch from nature. There was one you seemed to like when you were at Kester's Hill,—in the Murgthal, near Gernsbach. I framed it directly afterwards, with a wish to offer it to you; but I was afraid you would think it conceited and absurd if I did. May I send it to you?"

"To keep?—for my own?" said Ruth. "I should like it extremely; only, why should you waste it on me?"

"I will send it," replied Stephen, "and any others afterwards that you care to copy; and if you will really let me try to teach you something of what I was taught myself, it will be the greatest possible pleasure to me."

Ruth's acceptance and thanks were bright and cordial, and she promised to be, at any rate, a patient and painstaking pupil; and then, Colonel Kennedy having by this time finished his letters and left the room, Stephen said, suddenly,—

"I am afraid you thought me very rude yesterday afternoon, Miss Charteris, when I left you so abruptly."

The color rose suddenly to Ruth's face.

"I am afraid you thought *me* very silly," she said, with a smile. "You were quite right to leave me, and it was babyish to mind; but I was tired and cold, and just for the minute it seemed rather forlorn, all by myself. Please don't apologize, for you did the best thing you could have done."

"No, I didn't," Stephen replied, abruptly. "I might easily have prevented your feeling deserted and uncomfortable, without really losing any time; but I am afraid my manners have grown very rusty up on Dartmoor. The truth is, that I knew you did not really need any

help, after I once saw you out of the water, while it was of consequence to get Miss Barrington home as quickly as possible ; and you had been so brave and helpful all the time that I quite forgot how lonely a lady might feel if she were left in that way, even though there were no further danger or real difficulty. It was very stupid of me ; but I hope—I am sure you know—the very last thing I could mean——”

Ruth came to the rescue with a gay laugh.

“The truth is, Mr. Powys, you paid me a compliment which I didn’t deserve when you treated me as if I were really a sensible woman, instead of only making believe to be one ; but I don’t suppose you can imagine the depressing influence of heavy, dripping woollen skirts clinging to you when you are trying to walk on a cold, dark night.”

She spoke lightly, and, rusty though Stephen’s knowledge of ladies might have grown, he perceived that she wished to put an end to any personal discussion : so he returned at once to the subject of drawing, until he was summoned to start with the other gentlemen.

The unwelcome thaw which had been foretold the previous day had really come ; it had rained long before midnight, and had continued to do so for many hours ; but this morning, though damp and dull, was fair and calm. The sky was overcast, and more rain was evidently impending ; but it did not come during the day, which was pleasant to the end.

In the afternoon, when the gentlemen were shooting in the park, Ruth went out with them for part of the time, and was with them when their party broke up.

Those who had only come for the day had all gone homewards, some driving, and some by train, and Ruth, her brother and Colonel Kennedy, Leonard and Ste-

phen, were all walking back to the house, discussing the results of the day's sport, when they were overtaken by Daniel on horseback, evidently returning from some expedition. He stopped to inquire, with all the keen interest of an old servant, how the day had gone off, in which places there had been the best sport, who had shot the most successfully, and so on.

"And how has *your* day gone off, Daniel?" said Ruth, as he walked his horse slowly by her side. "You must tell us that, now."

"Yes, Daniel," said Edgar Charteris. "You're a great swell, I see. Where have you been galivanting in that magnificent get-up?"

"Just to Kester's Hill, Mr. Edgar, seein' my Joe wed: so I was tied to be a bit smart."

"I hope it all went off well?" said Stephen.

"You had a nice day for it," said Ruth, almost at the same moment.

"Well, I can't say but what it might easy have been worse, Miss Ruth," Daniel replied. "And as for t' weddin', sir, thank you, I've not got nothin' to say agen it."

Daniel was so evidently not enthusiastic about it that Edgar, who was nearly as great a favorite with the old man as Ruth, thought it might be amusing to draw him out on the subject.

"Joe has made quick work of his courting, I think, Daniel, hasn't he? It can't be many weeks since he first went to Kester's Hill."

"Quick enough, Mr. Edgar. You're about right there. But when t' lasses has got all t' coortin' to do theirsels, they're always for gettin' done wi' it pretty sharp,—afore t' chap has a chance to get his head loose and be off, you see!"

The gentlemen all laughed, and Edgar answered,—

"So Joe has been fairly caught, has he? Yoked for life with a gray mare: is that it, Daniel?"

"Summat like it, I'm thinkin', sir. He's a good lad, is Joe; but he was always a bit soft and easy driven."

"She's a sensible, respectable young woman, all the same, Daniel, I think," said Stephen. "And I believe she'll make him a good wife in her own way."

"M'appen she may, sir. She's a fine, strappin' lass, and a stirrin', fendy sort of a body: there's no denyin' of that. But she's a good bit older nor him, and she's one that'll have to be missis and master too, if there's to be any peace i' t' hoose; and that's just havin' things wrong end up,—leastways, to *my* thinkin'!"

"I'm afraid you're an old tyrant, Daniel," replied Edgar. "But it's all the fashion now, you know, for the ladies to choose to be the masters."

"I know nowt at all about t' fashions, Mr. Edgar; but a masterful wife's a thing I can't abide to see,—and never could."

"But what if she's the best and wisest of the two, Daniel? It does happen sometimes, you know, that the woman knows best; and wouldn't you say then that the man had better let her guide him?"

Leonard was the speaker this time; and, though his words were addressed to Daniel, and were spoken in the same light tone which Edgar Charteris had used, as if he merely wished to draw the old man on to talk, there was something in his manner by which Ruth knew that he intended *her* to understand that he meant them as the expression of a personal feeling. She did not look at him, however, and no one but Colonel Kennedy saw her slight change of color.

Daniel's answer came without hesitation.

"I'd say first as she was wrong matched, sir. A fine

lass has no call to tak' up wi' an idle lad that hasn't sense enough for hissel'. And as for her thinkin' to guide him, there's not much ever comes o' *that* wark but fratchin'. Them as wants drivin' most never likes bein' driven, and always jibs just at t' worst spots o' t' road, where they can do t' most mischief."

There was a twinkle in the old man's eyes which made Colonel Kennedy suspect that, under cover of his generalities, he was enjoying a consciousness of a personal application of his words, and he saw that Leonard, at any rate, seemed to have no inclination to challenge further observations.

"You're not far wrong, Daniel, I think," he said himself, as no one else spoke.

"I'm an old man now, sir, you see, and I've had a deal of experience, and I've seed a many folks wed, and watched what cam' on it. It's a queerish job, anyway, is gettin' lived, sir, and needs a deal o' judgment to get well through so t' far end. It's summat like climbin' t' screes,—and two together's better at it nor one; but I'd always have a lass tak' up wi' a lad as can keep hissel' well up-bank ahead on her, and give her a helpin' hand nows and thens."

They had now reached the turning to the stables, and, with a touch of his hat and a friendly "good-night," Daniel left them.

"What a sententious old boy he is!" said Edgar Charteris, to whom it was all simply a rather amusing exhibition of Daniel's dictatorial ways.

"He likes talking," replied Colonel Kennedy; "but there is plenty of sense in what he says."

"Only it's a subject on which wisdom is thrown away," replied Edgar. "For everybody marries by chance, not by rule, and always will."

He and Leonard now walked off to the offices to inspect the game which had been killed during the day, while the other three entered the house together.

"Daniel put it roughly enough," said Colonel Kennedy, as they stood in the hall; "but it wasn't half a bad outline of what married life should be."

"He assigned *us* rather an ignominious position," said Ruth, laughing. "It sounded too much as if we were to be helpless logs, dragged 'up the screes,' with labor and sorrow, by our companions."

"I don't think that is a fair inference, even from his actual words, Miss Charteris," said Stephen. "He said two together were better than one; and that puts the notion of either being a 'helpless log' quite out of the question, I should say. I think if you work out the idea, the woman's part would be onerous enough; for she would first have to inspire her companion with the courage and perseverance to 'keep hissel' well up-bank,' as Daniel called it, and then to be capable of following, with his help, to each freshly-gained height, which neither probably could have reached without the other."

Ruth smiled.

"You should take out a patent for making highly-finished pictures from other people's daubs, Mr. Powys," she said, before she turned away and went up-stairs.

"Realize that ideal, and you'll not have much left to wish for, Powys," Colonel Kennedy said, as they separated,—Stephen to go out again to the village, where he had some business, and he himself to the library.

"They are more likely to realize it than most people, if all goes smoothly," he thought, with a half sigh. "I can't help wishing him success; for I really believe he deserves her and would make her happy."

Colonel Kennedy, having once perceived Stephen's

wishes, was amused by the determined energy with which he pursued his object. He persuaded Mrs. L'Estrange to consent to pay his mother a visit in the following week, and to bring Ruth with her. It was all nominally for the sake of making Mrs. L'Estrange better acquainted with her people at Kester's Hill; and that purpose was kept so conscientiously in sight, and Stephen was so genuinely interested in his own plans for their pleasure and improvement, and so eager in trying to interest both ladies in his views with regard to them, that no one, except Colonel Kennedy, imagined him to have any other schemes in his head.

Fortunately for his chances of subsequent success, neither Mrs. L'Estrange, nor even Ruth herself, yet suspected anything of the kind. If they had, the invitation would probably have been declined; but, as it was, before the party at Throstlethwaite broke up it was settled that they were to be expected at Kester's Hill on the following Wednesday and would remain there till the Saturday.

CHAPTER XXVI.

NOTHING happened to prevent the proposed visit to Kester's Hill from taking place. Sophy Barrington was not, even then, well enough to leave Throstlethwaite, but neither was she ill enough to make it necessary that Mrs. L'Estrange should remain at home on her account: so she and Ruth fulfilled their engagement, and the three days passed very pleasantly.

Mrs. Powys found that her guests were not in the least

formidable, and really enjoyed their society, while Mrs. L'Estrange liked Stephen better and better the more she saw of him, and rejoiced in having him permanently established in a position where he seemed to be invaluable. He was already popular in the village, where even the roughest of the people liked and respected him, and where he had managed, even in the short time he had yet lived among them, to effect many improvements.

The village entertainment, which had been the excuse for his invitation to Mrs. L'Estrange and Ruth, took place on the last evening of their stay, and went off extremely well. The preparations for it had afforded full occupation for the two previous days, and he and Ruth had worked away at them together most indefatigably, finding time, however, to talk as well as to work, and growing rapidly in knowledge and appreciation of each other.

On the Saturday, Mrs. L'Estrange returned to Throstlethwaite, and Ruth to Monksholme.

"I am very glad that we came here, Ruth," said Mrs. L'Estrange, as they drove away from Kester's Hill. "Three days of such thoroughly intimate life together are worth more than three months of ordinary acquaintance, and it is a great pleasure to me to know what Mr. Powys really is, and to feel sure that the more I have to do with him the more I shall both respect and like him."

Ruth acquiesced heartily. It had not as yet occurred to her to think of Stephen as a possible lover, and therefore no consciousness checked the frank expression of her full appreciation of his mind and character. He had, in truth, been wise enough not to attempt to go too fast, or to make too decided a use of the opportunities afforded by this visit. For one thing, he dreaded exciting his

mother's observation, and bringing upon himself her anxious sympathy and constant questionings; while he was quite conscious, also, that if Mrs. L'Estrange were to become aware of his wishes too soon she might disapprove of them, and even might think it her duty to warn Ruth's parents of the danger; in which case, success might be made difficult to him, if not impossible. He felt also, even more strongly, that, after all Ruth had gone through in the summer, it would be both selfish and injudicious to excite and startle her now, when rest for both heart and mind must be what she most needed.

For every reason, therefore, he had been quiet and cautious; and he was rewarded for his prudent, unselfish self-control by the real progress in her regard which he could not help thinking himself justified in believing that he had made. He was sure that she had learned unconsciously to feel that he understood her, and that she could always rely on his sympathy with her and be certain that hers was most welcome to him; and with this he was for the present content.

On the following Monday, Mrs. L'Estrange was surprised by a sudden visit from Stephen, rather late in the afternoon. She was quite alone at home by this time, for Mrs. Barrington and Sophy were now gone back to Kilhowe, and Leonard, of course, was at Edenford.

There was nothing unnatural in Stephen's coming to Throstlethwaite at any time; but on this particular day she knew that he had had business at Edenford in the morning, and that it must therefore be something rather important which had brought him so far out of his way home.

She laid down her book as he was announced, and said, cordially,—

“This is an unexpected pleasure, Mr. Powys; but I

hope it does not mean that anything is wrong, or that your business at Edenford proved troublesome this morning?"

"Not at all. It is going on quite satisfactorily," replied Stephen. "I came round here on my way home, to bring you these papers which you left with me on Saturday to be looked through when I had time for them. I went through them yesterday."

He gave her a case containing important-looking papers as he spoke.

She took it, saying,—

"Thank you. You are very prompt; but I am quite sorry that you should have come so far round on purpose to bring them back, when any other day would really have done quite as well."

"I wanted to see your without delay," he answered, not quite in his natural manner. "The fact is, Mrs. L'Estrange, that there is one paper in that case which I am quite sure you never intended me to see. It must have been left among the others by mistake. Having seen it, I cannot now help my knowledge of its contents,—nor can I blame myself for reading it,—but I felt that I must tell you at once that I *had* read it. It is a copy of your will. When first I opened it, I imagined that it was a memorandum having some reference to the other deeds, and it was so short and simple that I had fully mastered its purport before I was aware that it could never have been intended to be among them."

Mrs. L'Estrange smiled.

"You are certainly right in supposing that I had no intention of giving you that paper among the others," she replied. "It must have been folded by mistake with one of them; but it is of no consequence whatever. Though I might not have thought it necessary to tell you what you now know, I have not the slightest objection to your know-

ing it; while even to say that I have perfect confidence in your silence is quite, I am sure, superfluous. I trust you completely. I am sorry that my carelessness—which is really very unusual, I hope—should have placed you even for a moment in so uncomfortable a position. There are few things more disagreeable than an accidental knowledge of other people's private affairs; but I hope you will not think of it any more, for it is of no importance, and, I assure you, does not annoy me in the least."

"But it is of the greatest importance to *me*," returned Stephen, quickly. "It affects me far too much for the matter to be so lightly set aside. Knowing, and especially knowing in this way, the position in which you have placed Miss Charteris, I cannot feel justified in not being perfectly open with you at once,—even though—"

Mrs. L'Estrange looked up at him in great surprise, but with a sudden full perception of the true state of the case.

"I never thought of this!" she exclaimed, in momentary dismay. "You mean that you love Miss Charteris, and that, knowing now my intentions with regard to her, you feel it your duty to tell me so?"

"Yes," Stephen answered, promptly. "I know well enough what may be the consequences of telling you, but, of course, after all this there was nothing else to be done. Until yesterday I had a right to be silent as long as I chose, and to think only of her and myself. I intended to do everything in my power to win her affection, and then, if I had succeeded, I should have braved the almost certain disapprobation of her family at first, both without compunction and without any fear of the ultimate result."

"I ought to have foreseen the probability of this," said Mrs. L'Estrange, gravely. "It is most unfortunate; and I am extremely sorry. I do not for one moment blame you, Mr. Powys, but I regret my own imprudence. I do

not suppose that Mr. and Mrs. Charteris have ever contemplated the possibility of their daughter being in such a position as she must be if she were to marry you. Neither she nor they know of my intentions with regard to her: that knowledge is confined to myself and my solicitors, and now to *you*; but, even without that knowledge, their views for her are ambitious."

"I know it; but I do not see that I am called upon to consider that at all," replied Stephen. "As for Miss Charteris herself, I am quite sure that if I can only make her love me, she will not hesitate to marry me because I am not rich or great. I intended to try my chance without warning those who were sure to oppose me. I still intend it; but *you* have now a right to know that I do."

Mrs. L'Estrange was silent for a moment; then she said,—

"Mr. Powys, I am the last person who can think it unnatural that she should be loved, or that, loving her, you should feel it hard to give her up; but——"

"I cannot promise to give her up," said Stephen, interrupting her hastily. "I have no right to assume that I have any chance of ever succeeding; but all that I *can* do to win her I *shall* do."

"Then I am indeed fairly warned, undoubtedly," replied Mrs. L'Estrange, much more calmly than Stephen had spoken. "Let us speak quite plainly. Ruth Charteris is a daughter to me in all but the name; and in the will which you have seen, I have given her the position of one. I have left to her, unconditionally, the twenty thousand pounds which would have been the fortune of my daughter if I had had one and my son had lived. Leonard takes the place of my son, as you know, upon certain conditions; but, in the event either of his failing to prove himself worthy of that place, or of his death without chil-

dren, I have made her my heiress. Have I not, then, the right to say to you that you must be wise in time?—that I am sorry for your disappointment, and heartily regret any share I may have unintentionally had in causing it, but that it is impossible for me to consent to such a marriage for Ruth, and that it is useless for you to hope for what can never be?”

“No one can say *that* but Miss Charteris herself,” was Stephen’s firm reply, immediately; “and only from her shall I take an answer. That you cannot consent, is what I was prepared to hear; but, though it must always be painful to me to grieve or displease you, it cannot shake my purpose. You have a right to say that in the event of her marriage with me you will cancel the will I have seen,—and I hope you *will* say so; you have also the right to say that if I do not agree to give up all my presumptuous hopes you cannot allow me to remain here. I should leave you with great regret, for you have been exceedingly kind to me, and I have been very happy working for you and with you; but I cannot give the promise you ask; and if my remaining depends on my giving it, I must go as soon as you can replace me.”

“If you stay till I can do *that*, you would either have succeeded so far that sending you away would do no good, or you would have failed so completely that it would be unnecessary, and I should only be depriving myself of your services to no purpose. Besides, we all know that there is nothing so interesting as martyrdom, and to banish you for such a reason would only be to play into your hands. We will put that notion aside. But would you really have Ruth forfeit prospects so brilliant for your sake? Is it not expecting her to make too great a sacrifice?”

“It must be for Miss Charteris to decide. Mrs. L’Es-

trange, to me it is no case for jesting. I love her; and when I have said that, I have said all that there is for me to say. She does not know it yet, and very possibly I may never succeed in making her love me; but I know her well enough to be sure that, *if I do*, she will not hesitate for a second between happiness and wealth, but will be content with the position I can give her. She is not a child. She may reasonably be trusted to choose for herself what her life shall be, and by her choice, and hers only, I shall abide. I wish that it did not displease you, but, though I am sorry, I cannot help it. In such a case I cannot be ruled by the wishes of her friends. If I did not believe that I could make her happy, I would refrain from seeking her, whatever the pain of giving her up; but I will not sacrifice either her or myself to considerations of this sort. The money I have inherited lately is little enough, but with it, according to my own judgment, I can afford to marry, for even if I were now to leave you I should easily find employment elsewhere; and, this being so, Miss Charteris herself must decide the rest. Don't think me perversely ungrateful, if you can help it," he added, with a good deal of feeling. "Your friendship and kindness have been invaluable ever since I came here, and I would do much to prove my appreciation of both; but I cannot submit to you in this case. I can only be very sorry to leave you in such a way. I have been too blunt, and hardly even courteous, I am afraid; but such things are not easy to say; and I hope you will believe—will understand——"

Mrs. L'Estrange interrupted him gently.

"I think I understand you better than you do me, Mr. Powys. You were a little too ready to jump at a conclusion and stand on the defensive. I have listened to you; and now it is my turn to be heard. I quite agree with

you that this is a question which you and Ruth must decide for yourselves, without interference from any one. I cannot quite say that I wish you to succeed, because, for selfish reasons, I have encouraged other hopes for her future; but if her choice does fall on you I shall have no fears for her happiness. I believe you deserve her, and not even her parents could make one real objection to her marriage with you, but that of poverty unsuited to the way in which she has been brought up. Her own fortune from her father, as you probably can guess, will be small; he gave Mrs. Kennedy five thousand pounds, and of course can do no more for Ruth. I quite believe, as you do, that if Ruth loves you she will not be deterred from marrying you by fear of poverty; but you may trust that part of the affair to me, with perfect confidence that Mr. Charteris shall be satisfied. Ruth is dearer to me than any one living, and I would do all I could to promote her happiness,—doing it none the less willingly that it insured yours also.”

It was said pleasantly, and Stephen was too much touched by her kindness to be able to express his gratitude very gracefully. She understood him, however, and checked his rather incoherent words, saying with a smile,—

“I have more to say, Mr. Powys, and, though I will not impose it as a condition, I have a request to make. I have told you that I can scarcely wish you success; and I think you know the reason?”

“You wish her to marry Mr. Barrington?” said Stephen, quickly.

“I wish her to marry the man who will make her the happiest,” replied Mrs. L'Estrange; “but I have *hoped* that she might marry Leonard, though I confess that lately I have seen less reason to think it probable. I will give you confidence for confidence, Mr. Powys. We can

trust each other. You know that they were companions in childhood. That their affection had grown into a stronger feeling was first known to me just before my boy's death. But for *that*, Leonard could scarcely have hoped ever to marry Ruth ; but as my heir, it was a marriage which would have pleased every one connected with them both. My property was, and is, entirely in my own power, and, though I naturally wished to adopt Leonard, whom we had brought up from his childhood, I suppose you know that he is no real relation to me, and had no claim upon me. I had not been altogether satisfied with his earlier life,—I need not enter into details,—and I decided on making my adoption of him conditional. He had debts, and I required of him a sufficiently long period of steady hard work to pay these for himself. I promised that if his conduct satisfied me during this time, and he came to me free from debt, I would then openly acknowledge him as my heir. He has many gifts and many good qualities, but he is weak, and I doubted whether even with such motives he could withstand temptation. I forbade him to speak to Ruth of his love for her until his time of trial was over, though I took care that she should know why he was silent. Much as I desired that she should be his wife and come here to be my child, I thought it best that they should have more time to know each other fully."

She paused, but Stephen said nothing, and she continued :

"I have been sorry to see that you and Leonard never cordially liked each other ; but lovers' eyes are quick, and I suppose you have each recognized a rival from the first ?"

"I certainly saw that Mr. Barrington admired Miss Charteris," said Stephen, "but they were evidently not engaged, and therefore——"

"You were free to enter the lists; unquestionably you were. But now I come to the point. Had Leonard spoken *then*, no one could doubt that he would have been accepted; but I prevented it. He has so far borne my test well. He has worked hard in all ways, and has thoroughly satisfied me that he has been doing his best; but I frankly admit that, though he is thus on his way to win one prize, *the other* seems to have been drifting away from him. It may be that Ruth has felt that he is not really suited to her; it may be that she has seen some one else who is; or it may be only the constraint of the position, which is an awkward one; but it is trying for Leonard, who is more devoted to her than ever. I do not ask you to abstain from one single effort to win her. Take your stand on even ground with Leonard, and succeed if you can; but will you for my sake refrain from speaking to her until he is free to do the same? He tells me that in October he will be clear of debt. If all goes well, he will then take my name and be my acknowledged heir. He will then be at liberty to try his fate with Ruth, and if you will submit to the same restriction I shall be grateful. Do your best meanwhile. Win her if you can, and, if you do, I will make all smooth for you. I will settle a sufficient fortune on Ruth to remove every difficulty, and still—failing Leonard and his children—make her my heiress. Will you promise this?"

"Without hesitation," was the instant reply. "You are very kind, and I am grateful; neither am I foolish enough not to rejoice in the certainty of having the means to give her the comforts she is accustomed to; but for the rest——"

"You don't like even the *chance* of her being really an heiress?"

"Not at all," he replied, half laughing.

"I cannot help that. You must not expect to have everything your own way. Leonard may still disappoint me and prove unworthy,—though I trust not,—or he may die childless. In either case, you and Ruth would succeed me, and I should know that both she and the property will be in good hands. I say 'you and Ruth,' for I cannot deny that I believe you will succeed with her; and though if you do I shall be disappointed for Leonard and for myself, for *her* I shall rejoice,—which is saying a great deal. Then we understand each other. Till October you will be patient. Ruth herself must then decide the question between you, and I will do my part impartially. Till then we need say no more about it. We can each be trusted to respect a confidence. Now, what are you going to do? Stay here, I hope? for you cannot easily get home."

"Thank you; but, if you do not mind, I will go home I shall walk."

"Walk! It is ten miles."

Stephen laughed.

"I forgot to study trains and so on when I decided to come round. I could not think about anything till I had seen you. But my mother expects me, and the walk will do me good."

"Telegraph to her that you stay here, unless, indeed, you wish to be alone,—which I can understand."

Stephen answered frankly that a long solitary walk was just what he did wish for, and after some further attempts on his part to speak of what he felt, which, however, were not very successful, they parted with increased feelings of regard on both sides.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE flower-garden at Monksholme was divided from the stable-yard and offices by a high wall. At the end, where this wall joined the house, there was a handsome conservatory, and at the other an ivy-covered pigeon-cote, the two being connected by a broad flagged walk under a light iron colonnade. Creepers were trained against the wall at the back of this long veranda, as well as round its pillars, and a small but brilliant Italian flower-garden occupied the terrace in front of it, while on a lower level, by the southern windows of the house, there was a large lawn, admirable for croquet, in spite of the old dial in its centre. Lower again, beyond the west end of the house, there was more flower-garden, lawn, and shrubbery; and beyond that again, great fields, studded here and there with fine single trees, and broken by soft masses of wood, sloped down to the shore of the lake. This colonnade was not only a useful screen, it was a pretty and rather peculiar finish to the garden, giving it an air of originality; and, commanding as it did a lovely view of lake and mountain, it was a pleasant lounge on summer afternoons.

There, one beautiful evening early in September, Ruth sat alone by the tea-table, over which she had been presiding. Two of her younger brothers, who were at home, and a couple of young lady guests, had returned to finish a game at croquet on the lower lawn, and Mrs. Charteris had gone into the conservatory; but Ruth lingered in the colonnade, though the rustic chairs round her were all empty. A book lay open on her lap, but she was not

reading. She gazed dreamily and rather sadly on the view before her, now lighted up with all the rich coloring of an autumn sunset ; and yet the scene was both peaceful and cheerful, for the picturesque groups of cattle scattered over the fields gave it life.

Ruth was scarcely thinking of what she saw. She knew that the time must soon come now when Leonard's position would be decided, and she was sure that he would not then be content to accept as final her rejection of the previous autumn. It would all be painful and disagreeable, and it would disappoint her own people as well as Mrs. L'Estrange, but she had no doubt as to what her decision must be. She knew, for certain, that in spite of his persistent devotion to herself she could never again feel love for Leonard.

He had gone on working hard and satisfying all his aunt's expectations in every way, and Ruth really believed that he was now in many ways more worthy to be loved than he had been in the days when she had loved him so well and trusted him so blindly ; but her eyes had been rudely opened once for all, and she could not deceive herself again. She fully recognized his merits, such as they were, and felt that she could continue to give him much of the sisterly friendship of their early days if he would be content with it, as she hoped that in time he would be ; but any stronger feeling was gone, and could never return.

She had seen and felt the moral weakness that was ingrained in his nature, and was thankful to have seen it before it was too late ; but she had still a strong affection for him, as she might have had for one of her brothers in similar circumstances. She could not help being touched by his genuine, constant love for herself, and she shrank not unnaturally from the thought of the appeal which she

knew would be made to her as soon as he was openly acknowledged as his aunt's heir. and the pain which her answer would give.

That time must be drawing near. She knew nothing very definite as to his present position, for since that evening at Throstlethwaite, in the winter, she had carefully avoided allowing him any chance of private conversation with her; but he had been living carefully and working hard ever since, and she had no reason to suppose that his expectation of "reaching the top of the hill," after his own fashion, in October, would be disappointed.

The series of articles, which only she and Mrs. L'Estrange as yet knew to be his, had appeared in due course, and had been successful enough to enable him to get a chance paper or two inserted in other periodicals: there was therefore every reason to believe that he had made money quite as fast as he had expected to do.

Mrs. L'Estrange was now abroad, but she was to be at home before the end of the present month, and then, of course, all would soon be settled. It would be a pleasure to her to find that Leonard had responded so well to her appeal, and Ruth could not help a feeling of sadness at the thought that *she* must in some degree mar that pleasure, and that her doing so would scarcely be comprehensible to any one knowing so little of the truth as was known to Mrs. L'Estrange.

It was altogether uncomfortable.

The magazine containing Leonard's last effusion was the book which now lay open before her, and it had naturally suggested this train of thought, for she could trace her own influence in almost every page. It touched her, but it could not kindle a spark of her former feeling.

"It *would* be altogether 'wrong end up,' as Daniel

expressed it," she thought. "The man *should* be 'up bank,' and guide, not be guided. He was right, too, as to the uselessness of *our* ever hoping to guide to any real good purpose; for in the only case when I really tried to influence him, Leonard instantly fell back on his masculine superiority of judgment. The thing I don't understand is, how I could ever have been so blind as to believe in him as I did."

She was roused from her reverie by the opening of a door in the wall close by the pigeon-cote, which led from the stables into the garden.

Stephen Powys, who was expected to dine and sleep at Monksholme, made his appearance, and came at once to the tea-table.

Mrs. Charteris looked from the conservatory to see who had come in, but did not apparently think it necessary to disturb herself, and, after a few final words to the gardener, left it by another door, and went into the house.

Ruth looked up and smiled, and offered tea, which Stephen accepted, as he would have done anything else which justified him in remaining near her.

During the eight months which had passed since his important conversation with Mrs. L'Estrange, Stephen had strictly kept his promise to her of not seeking to come to any understanding with Ruth; but he had nevertheless contrived to make himself fill a very important part in her life. He was by no means sure that she had even yet thought of him as a lover; but he felt that his coming was always welcome to her, and that she gave him more of her confidence than she would have done to any one for whom she had not a very unusual degree of friendship and regard.

He hoped, and almost believed, that the perception of his feeling for her would eventually do the rest, and

meanwhile he was satisfied. He hoped that even now she loved him without knowing it, but he did not wish her to know it until he was free to speak ; for if he were to see that she did, he doubted his own power really to keep his promise of silence,—as *he* interpreted it.

Leonard, in his place, would undoubtedly have felt justified in considering that it meant only no open engagement ; but Stephen adhered to the spirit as well as to the letter of his promise, and never said by looks or tones what he might not say in words.

He and Ruth had seen a good deal of each other during that spring and summer. No further word had passed between Mrs. L'Estrange and Stephen on the subject, but she had been generously neutral, and had asked them both to Throstlethwaite, exactly as she would have done before his confession.

He had been often at Monksholme, too, for he had undertaken (with Mrs. L'Estrange's ready consent) to superintend the building of some rather extensive new farm-premises for Mr. Charteris, to whom he was also always a welcome guest. He gave Ruth drawing-lessons as regularly as if he had been really her master, but their conversations were by no means always limited to art. Nevertheless, not even Mrs. Charteris, quick-sighted chaperon though she was usually, suspected the attachment which was so quietly growing under her eyes ; for, like every one else, she was so firmly persuaded that Ruth and Leonard had a secret understanding together, and were only waiting their time, that she could see nothing else.

Agatha was not much in company with them.

During the early months of the year her children were not well, which kept her a good deal at home ; and Stephen certainly owed a debt of gratitude to the little

girl whose birth in July effectually prevented her mother from interfering with his proceedings. Ruth was often staying with her sister for several days at a time, but, though Colonel Kennedy heartily liked Stephen, and cultivated his friendship and frequently invited him to his house, he never did so when Ruth was there, discreetly judging that the best help he could give them was to refrain from exposing their evidently increasing attraction for each other to Agatha's quick observation and unscrupulous antagonism.

This was the state of things when September began.

Stephen had not been long in the colonnade when a sound of wheels was heard in the stable-yard on the other side of the wall.

"That is papa coming home," said Ruth.

The next moment Mr. Charteris came through the door by the pigeon-cote and joined them. He had been over to Edenford for the day, to attend a county meeting, and had just returned. He communicated a few small items of news in rather an absent manner, and then said, abruptly,—

"I heard one thing at Edenford to-day which has been a great shock; and I am glad to find you here, Powys, and have a chance of talking it over quietly with you. It is a most unpleasant thing, and one which must be mentioned absolutely to no one, but possibly you may be able to throw some light upon it."

Ruth rose from her chair.

"I suppose all that means that I had better go away, papa; though you have excited my curiosity horribly."

"No, Ruth, you had better stay," replied her father, gravely. "I can trust you thoroughly, and you may be able to help us to some solution of the puzzle. If the thing is true, every one will know it soon enough; while

if it is not, I know the suspicion will never go further through you. When Leonard Barrington returns to-morrow morning to the bank, he will be met by a most serious charge,—nothing less, in fact, than theft."

"Papa! Impossible!" cried Ruth.

"I wish I could think so," replied Mr. Charteris; "but, though it seems shocking to doubt him, the evidence is very awkward. At the beginning of last month a Mrs. Pryor, an acquaintance of the Nicholises, who was sleeping at the Railway Hotel on her way to pay visits in Scotland, received a telegram from Vienna to say that her son was dangerously ill there. She started southward at once, but deposited her diamonds (very valuable ones) at the bank in Edenford rather than take them with her, as she wished to have no delay in London to make any arrangement about them there. She said that she had always intended to winter in Sicily, and should not now return to England before going there,—certainly not until May. Nichols heard this morning that both she and her son have died at Vienna of diphtheria, and he is desired to send the diamonds now in his charge by a safe hand to certain solicitors in London not later than Saturday. On looking for them, he found only the empty case in the safe where they had been placed."

"But why is Leonard suspected?" asked Ruth.

"Because for the last six months Nichols has been employing him as a sort of private secretary. His position lately has been rather an awkward one, for it was almost impossible as time went on that he should continue to be a mere clerk. Mrs. L'Estrange wisely arranged it all privately with old Nichols. She wished Leonard to have regular appointed work and to earn his salary, but she wanted him also to have more freedom, whenever she required him to be at home, than could conveniently have

been given to him as a clerk. She herself, I believe, really paid his salary, and Nichols found work for him. He liked him personally and he trusted him thoroughly, so it answered very well that he should be as I said, a confidential secretary,—a supernumerary, in fact. Leonard consequently knew not only where the diamonds were, but that they were not likely to be inquired for before May. The strongest proof against him, however, is that a ring certainly his, and which he is known to have lost lately, was found in the jewel-case; while a slip of paper in Nichols's own hand-writing, containing memoranda for some notes which he wished Leonard to write, was close to it. This paper was dated, and Nichols clearly remembers giving it to Leonard himself. Brandon was not at home then. Nichols was summoned away from the bank in a hurry that morning on account of an accident to his wife; he gave Leonard this paper of directions as to the correspondence, and left him alone there in the private room. The keys of the safe were accessible to him, for some one was expected to call who might wish to inspect one of the deeds kept in it. It is a horribly awkward case."

Ruth uttered a low cry, and leaned back in her chair looking so deadly pale that Stephen almost involuntarily started up as if to assist her.

She recovered herself almost instantly, and begged her father to tell them at once all he knew. Mr. Charteris said that Mr. Nichols had told this discovery only to his partner, Mr. Brandon, and that they had as yet mentioned it to no one else. Mrs. L'Estrange was abroad, and they had sent to him, knowing him to be presiding at the meeting which was held that day; and, looking upon him as her oldest and most trusted friend, they had laid the case before him.

"But what does Leonard himself say, papa?" asked Ruth, anxiously. St
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"He knows nothing of the charge as yet. He has had leave of absence for a few days, you know, on account of poor Sophy's death. Her funeral was to be to-day, if you remember, and he returns to his work to-morrow morning. Both Nichols and Brandon shrank from sending over for him to-day, and there was time enough to wait, while, as the affair has been kept strictly secret, he will go back without suspecting his danger." c
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"It *must* be impossible!" said Ruth. "He will explain and clear himself."

Mr. Charteris shook his head.

"I hardly dare to hope it, Ruth. The evidence is very strong. Only two days after this very date he asked for a day's leave and went up to London by one night's mail, returning by the next. Of course, no one could suppose he meant really to *steal* the diamonds; he could have no motive for running such a risk; but what we all think is, that under some temporary pressure of debt, which he wished to conceal from Mrs. L'Estrange, he has pawned them, trusting to redeem them long before May, if, as we know has lately been almost openly assumed, she means to acknowledge him as her heir as soon as she comes home. He has been straining every nerve, we all know, to clear off his debts quickly and attain this object, and it has been too much for him. She hoped that the trial would be a useful lesson for him, and so it has seemed to be; but I suppose there must have been heavier claims upon him than those he acknowledged to her at the time of Frank's death, and that he has set himself a task beyond his powers. The temptation has been too great. Can you throw any light on his affairs, Powys?"

"I have never been in the least in his confidence,"

Stephen replied. "What you assume seems only too probable, I fear."

Ruth now rose abruptly, and left them before her father could appeal to her. She could not say, as Stephen had done, that she knew nothing; but, unfortunately, what she knew only too strongly confirmed all that her father and the bankers had assumed. She could not stay to be questioned. She felt too utterly shaken and bewildered for anything but solitude, and she quickly left the colonnade and went into the house.

Both gentlemen looked after her gravely and compassionately, recognizing her suffering, and recognizing also that her silence and her flight were signs not to be mistaken that she had no favorable information to give, and that the facts she had heard produced the same impression on her mind as on theirs.

Neither spoke of her, however; and there was even a considerable silence before they resumed the discussion of all the details of the case, and took into consideration what was the best course to be followed under the circumstances.

Mrs. L'Estrange was at Ischl, and quite out of reach. Mr. Charteris felt that it was his place to represent her and do whatever could be done for Leonard, and he was glad to have Stephen to consult with; but both felt that the case was a peculiarly awkward and difficult one to manage, and they had little hope of a good result from any efforts to shield Leonard from the consequences of his criminal folly.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

RUTH appeared at dinner composed and like herself again, only with a look in her eyes and a tone in her voice which made Stephen's heart ache in silent sympathy. He could not bear to see her suffer and feel himself powerless to relieve her.

In the evening a round game at cards was proposed, and readily assented to by most of the party, which was entirely composed of young people; but Stephen quietly reminded Ruth that it was some time since she had shown him her drawings, and at the same time asked Mrs. Charteris if there would not be a sufficient number without them. Mrs. Charteris agreed that the game could go on perfectly well without them, and Ruth thankfully accepted the release. Stephen drew a low chair for her close to a table at the other end of the long room, and placed himself so as to screen her from view.

"You are tired," he said, as he opened her portfolio. "Let me look over your sketches and make remarks, but don't talk or even listen more than you like."

Ruth smiled.

"That would be rather too ungrateful, I think. I am glad to be spared from a noisy, tiresome game, but I am not at all too tired to profit by my lesson."

Stephen looked and criticised, and Ruth listened quietly; but at length they came upon a sketch which brought a shadow to her face. Sophy Barrington had never really recovered from her accident on the ice, and had been gradually growing weaker all the summer. Only

three weeks ago Ruth had gone over to Kilhowe to spend a day with her, and as Sophy had fallen asleep while Ruth sat by her sofa in the garden, she had made a rough sketch of the cottage. Stephen would have passed on in silence to the next, but Ruth put her hand on it and spoke.

"Mr. Powys, did papa tell you anything more after I came away this afternoon?"

"Nothing very material," replied Stephen. "Nothing more can be known till to-morrow. Your father is going up to Edenford again in the morning, and Mr. Nichols and Mr. Brandon have both promised to wait until he is there, to mention the matter to Mr. Barrington. Mr. Charteris was discussing with me what could be done in the event of their suspicions being true; but we do not think that anything can be done in that case. Of course, Mr. Charteris will offer, on Mrs. L'Estrange's behalf, to redeem the diamonds at once if they have been pledged; but, if it is so, I do not see how the matter can be really hushed up in that way. No first-class jewelers would have anything to do with such a transaction, and valuable diamonds left for weeks in the hands of unscrupulous people are as likely as not to have been tampered with. In that case, granting that Mrs. L'Estrange would pay the immense sum it would cost to replace them, concealment would be absolutely impossible; but, even if they are recovered intact, the breach of trust is so grave a matter, and their own reputation might so easily be involved, if the affair were ever so faintly suspected afterwards, that I doubt whether either Nichols or Brandon will consent to any compromise. Mr. Charteris thinks much as I do about it, but he will do all he possibly can, though in his position he must necessarily be very careful in dealing with such a question. All this is only supposing the worst to be true, you know; and we must hope that Mr. Barrington

ton will easily explain, and clear himself from all suspicion."

He had told her all that there was to tell, and she knew that he had.

"Thank you," she said, gently. Then, after a moment's pause, she added the rather embarrassing question, "What is your own impression?"

"I scarcely know. The evidence of the ring, and of the memorandum corresponding so exactly with the date of his being left there in charge, is very awkward, and his sudden journey to London so soon afterwards does not tend to weaken it; but it is difficult to conceive such utter folly; and——"

Ruth could hardly command her voice as she said,—

"If only I could warn him of the danger, so that he might be prepared to meet it and avoid the disgrace of inquiry!"

Stephen answered her with grave compassion.

"If, as we will hope, he is innocent, he will easily clear himself, I have no doubt, and there will be no disgrace. If he is guilty, no warning could enable him to avoid it, for flight would only be to acknowledge the truth of the charge."

"But the trial—the punishment?" said Ruth, looking up with eyes so full of suffering that Stephen could not bear it, and hastily exclaimed,—

"Is there anything that I can do for you? Shall I telegraph for you early in the morning?"

Ruth shook her head.

"It would do no good. He will leave Kilhowe before six to catch the train at Dale End. Neither note nor telegram would reach him in time to stop him. Besides, of course, papa is bound to be silent. Even if it were possible, no warning must be sent from here. Nothing can

be done, I know; but it is so horrible to think of what may be to come——” She could say no more.

“The ruin of a life must always be sad to see,” said Stephen; “but hope, while you can, that he is innocent, and that he will prove it all to be a mistake.”

Ruth was silent.

He saw that she could not believe Leonard to be innocent, any more than he himself could; but no more was said, for the round game had come to an end, and Mrs. Charteris was breaking up the party.

The ladies went to their rooms. The gentlemen, with the exception of Mr. Charteris, adjourned to the garden to smoke. It was a fine starlight night, with a moon just rising over the shoulder of the mountain.

Ruth shut herself at once into her own room, and dismissed her maid as soon as possible, for she longed to be alone. She hated herself for not being confident of Leonard's innocence of such a crime as this. It was horrible, cruel, and base to doubt him now, in spite of all her knowledge of his weakness and want of really high principle; and yet she could not banish the fear that he might have yielded to a temptation too strong for him. She felt almost as if she herself were in part the cause of it, for she knew that his love for her had been urging him to win his promised position as quickly as possible. She no longer loved him as she had done, she knew that she never could love him in that way again; but under the fear of this horrible danger hanging over him, all her early sisterly affection revived in full force, and a multitude of complicated feelings helped to make her wretched. The idea of his being tried as a common thief and punished as a felon was intolerable to her. She shuddered at the thought.

Suddenly she started up impetuously. She saw how

she could save him, at any rate, from the worst. She would warn him in time. She must do it in absolute secrecy. She must not compromise her father. But she *could* do it, and it should be done. There was a foot-path over the mountains on the opposite side of the lake, leading from Carlsgill direct into the heart of Lingdale. She knew the way perfectly, for it was a favorite summer excursion, and by it she would go.

To walk down to the lake, get out a boat, and row herself over to Carlsgill, would take about an hour. In two more she could easily cross the fells to Kilhowe. The moon had just risen, and was nearly full, so she could count on bright moonlight till sunrise, which would be soon after five. She did not think that she could safely start, without risk of being seen or heard, until one o'clock; but even then she could reckon on reaching Kilhowe by four. Her errand there would not take long, and she could be at home again soon after seven. Her maid never came to her room till nearly eight; but even if she were accidentally delayed, or were to be seen coming in, it would only be supposed that she had got up early, as she often did in summer, and had gone out alone. No one would be surprised.

She could be at Kilhowe by four o'clock. If her warning were not needed, no harm would be done. If it were, Leonard would have time to cross the mountains to a station on another line of railway where he was not known, and he could be at Liverpool almost as soon as he would be missed from the bank. When all was safe and the affair forgotten, she would tell her father what she had done; but not till then.

Ruth began her preparations promptly and prudently. She arranged her room to look as if she had spent the night there as usual. Then she dressed herself in a strong

woolen petticoat, a warm, dark serge dress, a water-proof cloak, and a simple felt hat, so that she was quite unobtrusive, and was prepared to encounter the cold of a clear autumn night on the fells, or rough weather if necessary. She took with her all the money she had, in case Leonard should need to be supplied; and then, extinguishing her candle, she threw her window wide open, and sat down by it to wait until she could venture to start.

Her window looked towards the garden, and was at the end of the house near the conservatory. She both heard and saw that the young men were still sitting in the colonnade, smoking and talking. At length one rose and left the group, and, as he disappeared round the corner of the house, she knew by the height that it was Mr. Powys. The others were not long in following him. She heard steps on the stairs, doors shutting and the servants bolting and barring below, and then all was quiet. She waited for another half-hour, and then, as the stable clock struck one, she ventured to move. No light gleamed from any of the windows on that side of the house, and she believed that it was now quite safe to start.

In the days of tom-boy scrapes long ago, she had often got out of her window, and she did it again now. A projecting spout enabled her to step down upon the top of the garden wall, which joined the house to the conservatory. This angle was in the shadow of the house, so that she was not likely to be seen, even if any one were still up; and as the wall was strongly trellised, and she was active and sure-footed, she soon let herself down, and stood on the grass close by the door into the conservatory. She moved cautiously round into the shelter of the veranda, and then paused to consider.

She was not now afraid of being either seen or heard from the house, for she knew that the door by the pigeon-cote could be opened noiselessly ; but she *was* a little afraid of rousing the dogs. Quiz was tolerably safe, for he always slept in the butler's room at the other side of the house ; but Hector's kennel stood in the yard, just behind the wall of the veranda, and although she had so far taken the precaution of carrying the strong boots which she must wear for such a walk tied to her belt, she feared that even her lightest tread so near him would waken Hector. She must trust to her voice to quiet him if he did awake, and she stole softly along the colonnade. She reached the door safely, and passed through it without the slightest noise breaking the stillness of the night. Hector was evidently sleeping soundly. Then she breathed freely, and, after putting on her boots, hurried across the fields and through the wood to the landing-place, too intent on her purpose to feel any fear, or to look to the right or left, until she had unchained a boat and rowed out into the lake.

There she paused.

How lovely it was ! The broad, bright track of the silvery moonlight over the water, the deep, dark shadows near the shore under the mountains, and the perfect stillness of everything,—all seemed to give her strength and courage for the task before her.

Her heart was now too fully set on saving Leonard to allow of nervous fears holding her back. She rowed on steadily till she reached the opposite shore ; then, after making her boat secure, she crossed the high-road, and, passing very quietly through the little village of Carls-gill, made her way up the side of a beck which flowed through it. For rather more than an hour she walked on up this gorge between the hills, following the path by the stream,

which splashed and sparkled in the moonlight, and seemed to murmur encouragement to her as it danced among the rocks and stones which filled its bed.

At length she came to the head of the hill where the brook rose, and stood on the top of the pass which was the lowest point of the mountain-ridge dividing the large valley of Thorndale, in which Brideswater lay, from the narrower one of Lingdale. Here she sat down for a moment, to rest, and to decide between two courses.

The place which she had now reached was in a dip between two mountains. She could follow her present path across the ridge here, and then down a gorge similar to the one she had come up, which would lead her to a village near the head of Lingdale, whence she could go by the road to Kilhowe. This was simple and easy, and would take nearly an hour. She could also strike up over the shoulder of the mountain which rose sharply on her right, walk along the top of the ridge, and so descend direct on Kilhowe. There was no path this way; but she did not need one. The moon gave ample light, and she should save at least twenty minutes, which might be valuable. This thought decided her.

She began at once to ascend the rough rocky slope, alternately scrambling over stones and wading knee-deep in heather and bracken dripping with dew. In about a quarter of an hour she stood on the top of the ridge, whence she had a view of both valleys. She saw that both now were filled with a thick white mist.

She had been ascending continuously during her walk, and had kept above its level, but she now perceived that though the sky overhead was clear and the moon brilliant, clouds were already hanging on some of the lower peaks. She hurried on among the crags, lest one should settle on the hill where she was; but her haste was unavailing.

Before she could reach the point whence a ten minutes' run would take her down the grassy slopes to Kilhowe, she saw a wreath of thick cloud drifting towards her, and the next moment it surrounded her. The moon above shone with just power enough to make it not absolutely dark ; but it was the dimmest possible twilight, and she could not see a yard before her.

Ruth was by far too well trained a mountain maiden to attempt to skirt the crags in the dense mist. She knew that if she did so she might either walk over a precipice into the Lingdale Quarries, or find herself, when it cleared, a mile or two farther from Kilhowe than she was at present. She wrapped herself in her cloak and sat down under a rock, to wait till it should be safe to proceed on her way. She could not see her watch, but she knew that it must be nearly half-past three ; and she had a horrible fear that, unless the wind should rise, the sun alone would clear away the mist.

She was not a victim to nerves or fanciful fears. She knew that she was in no danger whatever. But, thoroughly rational and brave though she was, she could not keep up her spirits against the depressing influence of that long, weary, lonely watch in the damp, chill darkness. She had no means of knowing how time was passing, and the minutes seemed like hours when she thought of the chance of not being able, after all, to reach Kilhowe in time to be of any use. The pain of knowing how low his moral cowardice could make Leonard sink had not come as a shock, but as a confirmation of previous fears, yet it distressed her acutely ; though it was almost overpowered by the dread of failing, in spite of all her efforts, to save him from disgraceful punishment.

Gradually a faint light, growing slowly but steadily

stronger, came through the mist. It was the dawn at last. A slight wind rose, and for a moment the clouds drifted away from her. The valleys below were filled with white mist, looking like gigantic lakes on either side of her; clouds hung on most of the hills; but here and there a peak or crag stood out clear and imposing above the writhing mist, looking unnaturally dark and high.

Ruth sprang to her feet, only dimly conscious of the wild peculiar beauty of the scene, for it was five o'clock, and she must hurry on. She had not gone far when the clouds settled again upon the hill, and she was obliged once more to stop. It was daylight now, however, and she thought she would try to find her way even through the mist; but it proved hopelessly baffling, and after walking for a quarter of an hour she found herself again by the same rock where she had sat so long.

She waited now in feverish impatience, for the train that came up from the town by the sea, bringing miners and quarrymen to their work, stopped at Dale End soon after six, and, as Dale End was more than a mile from Kilhowe, Leonard must leave home before that hour. She would not look at her watch, lest she should see that she was too late. At last a ray of golden light suddenly pierced the mist, which seemed to rise under its touch, and rolled itself in huge folds over the tops of the mountains. The sun had risen high enough to gild the peaks which were free from clouds, and Ruth saw with horror that it was almost high enough to shine on the lower slopes. The tops of the trees in the woods near the lake were already tinged with brilliant light.

She hurried on over the rocks as fast as she could, excitement overpowering fatigue, and very soon she stood at the top of the slope above Kilhowe; but the first thing she saw was the white column of steam in the distance as

the train approached Dale End. She saw it stop for a moment at the little station and then move on again. She was too late! In spite of all her efforts, she had been powerless to save Leonard; and, utterly forgetting that she ought by this time to have been far on her way home, she threw herself down among the heather in a burst of passionate grief and disappointment.

She was suddenly roused by a much more rapid and violent movement in the heather near her than could have been caused by even the most excited and terrified sheep, which was the only animal likely to be there, and, springing in alarm to her feet, she was almost knocked down by the caresses of her own Hector.

The dog must have tracked her as soon as he was unchained in the morning, she supposed, and she knew that the gamekeeper was often about by four o'clock; but how could he have crossed the lake? She could not make it out, but even in the first bitterness of her disappointment she felt that there was a strange, unaccountable, soothing power in the dumb, unconscious, but perfectly intelligible sympathy of the affectionate animal. It recalled her, however, to a recollection that she must lose no time in going home. Now that she had no hope to excite and strengthen her, she became conscious of fatigue, and the long walk home alone seemed as if it must be too much for her.

Nevertheless, she must make the effort, and, saying wearily, "We must go home, old doggie!" she prepared to move.

Instead of rushing frantically on before her as she had naturally expected to see him do, Hector bounded and barked, and made a dash down the hill-side towards Lingdale.

Ruth looked after him, surprised, but her call died

away before it was spoken, for coming leisurely round some rocks just below her she saw Stephen Powys on his way up the hill, and almost close to her.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"MISS CHARTERIS!" Stephen exclaimed, in the greatest astonishment, for he had not seen her until that moment. "How *do* you come to be here at this hour?"

Ruth colored painfully, but she answered, as usual, bravely and frankly.

"I wanted to warn Leonard," she said. "I knew I must do it secretly, because of not compromising papa, so I could not start before one; but I could easily have been here by four o'clock, only I was caught in the mist as I was crossing the ridge, and was obliged to stop. When it cleared, I saw the train passing and knew that I was too late."

Stephen looked at her with grave, pitying eyes.

"And you have really ventured alone across the hills at night to warn him?"

"It was the only chance," she said, deprecatingly, "and I could not bear to make no effort to help him. But *you*? How do you come to be out so early?"

It was Stephen's turn to change color now, and a deep flush passed across his face.

"The same errand," he answered, trying to speak lightly. "I brought Hector for company, you see, never dreaming that I was decoying him away from more necessary service."

"You started before me, then?"

"Yes. Soon after twelve. I walked faster too, very likely, so that I escaped the mist altogether, and was at Kilhowe long before three."

Ruth looked up eagerly.

"I will tell you my tale as we walk home," he continued, "for I do not think we have much time to lose, unless we wish our adventures to be public property,—which is scarcely desirable."

They walked rapidly homewards together.

"You will tell me really *all*, will you not?" Ruth said, before he began to speak.

"All," he replied. "And really, Miss Charteris, the story, though awkward enough, is not nearly so bad as we fancied it must be. Having been at Kilhowe before, I knew which was Mr. Barrington's window, and I managed to rouse him without disturbing any one else. I told him plainly all that Mr. Charteris had heard to-day, and then I heard his story in return. On that morning when he was left alone in the private room at the bank, his sister, Mrs. Bennett, came in to see him for a moment, and, finding him alone, stayed some time. She had heard about these diamonds and their beauty, and asked Leonard to show them to her. Most foolishly he did so, and even let her handle them. She dropped them accidentally, but he did not discover till he was putting them away after she was gone, that one of the large stones had been loosened by the fall. He found it, but he saw that the setting was also injured in one or two other places, and, with the instinct of trying to escape blame which seems so unfortunately habitual to him, he instantly determined to get them repaired privately and say nothing about it. He was pretty sure, he says, that the case would not be opened for a long time, and he took them to London to Robertson and Gardner's to be mended. The

choice of jewelers was a lucky one, for, of course, they are above suspicion."

"He would naturally go there," said Ruth. "They are the jewelers with whom Mrs. L'Estrange always deals, I know."

"Fortunately," replied Stephen. "But, considering how well jewelers know their customers' diamonds, it is lucky for him that they were not Mrs. Pryor's jewelers also. He left the diamonds with them to be repaired as soon as possible, and desired that a note might be sent to him at Throstlethwaite when they were ready. This note, inclosing the bill for what was done to them, he can produce. It is dated three weeks ago, but he has had no opportunity since of going up to London for them."

"They are all right, then, and there is no great harm done!" exclaimed Ruth, in a tone of relief. "He will only have to tell the truth, and take a scolding, and there will be an end of it! I am more thankful than I can tell you."

"There will be an end of it as far as will ever be known, Miss Charteris, for neither you nor I are likely ever to betray the rest of the story; but I shall tell you the whole. I don't profess to know the details of Mr. Barrington's debts, but the point is that he had lately been making great efforts to pay them off before Mrs. L'Estrange's return, and believed that he had done it, leaving himself barely money enough for the necessary current expenses of this month. Some little time ago, however, he had made himself responsible for a debt incurred by some friend who had previously helped *him*. I think that it was about the time of my first meeting with him. He had scarcely felt it possible to refuse his signature, and never expected more to be required of him; but this friend seems to have come to grief altogether (in

a rather dishonorable fashion, apparently), and the man who had originally lent the money applied for it about a fortnight ago very peremptorily. Mr. Barrington treated the difficulty most foolishly. If he had spoken frankly to Mr. Nichols, or to your father, or even to me, any one of us could, and of course would, have advanced him the money out of what will be due to him in October; but he dreaded the possibility of any such transactions coming to Mrs. L'Estrange's knowledge; he was afraid to deal with the matter boldly and sensibly, and his unfortunate facility of invention suggested to his mind the fatal idea of borrowing the two hundred pounds on these diamonds from Robertson and Gardner. He asked for the loan for a month; and they, knowing him, and so on, lent it at once. The diamonds can only be received back out of their hands by paying this sum; and he cannot pay it. To ask for an advance *now*, from either Mr. Nichols or Mr. Charteris, would be necessarily to acknowledge the truth and dishonor himself forever. For the same reason I could not advance it to him on Mrs. L'Estrange's account, for that would involve an explanation to her afterwards; but I could, fortunately, just manage to lend it to him myself, which will answer every purpose."

Ruth had listened with breathless interest, and with the deepest shame for Leonard, while Stephen told the story in his quiet, matter-of-fact manner.

"Oh, how good of you!" she said, as he stopped speaking. "But how can it be arranged? What will Leonard do? How will he explain?"

"He is gone to Edenford, as if nothing had happened," answered Stephen; "and when he is questioned he will tell the first half of the story accurately. He can show Robertson and Gardner's notes and bill in support of his statement, and all will appear so open and above-

board that I feel sure no one will suspect anything. He will do that part of it well, I have no doubt ; and then, as you said, he must take a reprimand, however sharp, with the best grace he can, and there will be an end of the matter. As for the rest, it would obviously be unwise to let the solicitors who act either for the bank or for Mrs. Pryor's executors have any communication with Robertson and Gardner. I shall, therefore, go up to London to-day myself, as if on other business, and Mr. Barrington will propose to write, knowing me to be in town, to desire me to go for him to pay the jeweler's bill and bring away the diamonds, and make them over to the right people at the time appointed. This will seem quite natural, and is certainly the best plan."

"It is very kind of you," said Ruth, "and I do not see how it can fail ; but—is it right?"

Stephen laughed.

"That is an awkward question, Miss Charteris, I admit. I am not at all sure that if the law heard of our proceedings some very ugly name might not be found for them, for, of course, what Mr. Barrington did was utterly illegal and dishonest ; but we are not going to ask any lawyer's opinion about the matter ; and, as a question of conscience, I see no harm in hushing it up. To let it all come out would be to expose him to absolute ruin, both socially and morally, besides causing great pain and shame to his friends ; and I think it is best to manage it in this way."

"For the public,—yes," said Ruth ; "but for Mrs. L'Estrange? Is it right for us to join a second time in deceiving her? She imposed this delay, and the payment of his debts, as a test of his fitness to take poor Frank's place, and we are defeating her object by keeping this from her."

"It does not seem to me possible to act in any other way in the matter," answered Stephen, decidedly, and Ruth, only too glad to have her protest silenced, said no more.

Stephen had told her the outline of the story, but he could not even attempt to make her understand his own share in it, and his motives for doing what he had done. He had gone over to Kilhowe believing that nothing could save Leonard from ruin and disgrace, but willing for Ruth's sake to do all he could for him, and to spare him at any rate the possible punishment for his crime by enabling him to escape.

It was one thing to do this; it was quite another to hear a story—true, as he felt, in every word—which turned the whole affair into a culpable folly rather than a serious crime, and which put it in his own power either to shield him entirely from its consequences or to let him suffer them to the full.

Leonard disgraced and banished, meant for Stephen himself the succession to both wealth and position. The temptation was for a moment strong; but the consciousness that he felt it one, only made Stephen more determined to resist it. He had felt it, as he had told Ruth, "impossible to act differently." He could not leave Leonard to ruin, in order that he might himself take his place; and he had promptly arranged the plan which he had described to Ruth, and which he fully believed could not fail to succeed in its object.

After this there was rather a long silence, and they did not speak again until they were very near the Carlsgill landing. In broad daylight, and with an active and helpful companion, Ruth had ventured on a shorter though a steeper and rougher way home than that which she had chosen at night. Keeping clear of the gorge and the path through the village, they had descended the

face of the mountain straight from the ridge, and thus reached the lake sooner than Stephen had thought it possible.

"I scarcely know how to thank you for all you have done, Mr. Powys," said Ruth, at last, "or for the help you have so generously given."

"That is nothing," he replied. "It is only a loan for a few weeks; and as for the walk, it was a pleasant expedition for *me*—but for *you*! It is horrible to think of your being out alone all night in the damp and cold on the hills! You must be quite exhausted."

"It won't hurt me," she answered; "I was warmly clothed, and I am strong. You need not be afraid of its doing me any harm."

"But why did you not ask me to do it for you? Surely you could have trusted to my doing *anything* you wanted done."

Ruth did not answer, for they had arrived at the landing. Each had a boat to take back to Monksholme, and, for obvious reasons, it was better that they should not return together.

As Ruth unfastened her boat, she said,—

"I think we will change boats, Mr. Powys. Having first choice last night, you took the lightest, of course. Will you resign it now?"

Receiving no answer, she looked round, and discovered that she was alone; but the next moment Stephen appeared hurrying from a cottage not far off, and bringing with him a mug of milk and some bread.

"I could get nothing better for you," he said; "but you *must* take this."

Ruth was not sorry to have some food, for she was beginning to feel very tired, and she took it gratefully before starting across the lake.

At the Monksholme boat-house, Stephen, who arrived there first (for he had learned by this time to manage a boat as well as any one), waited till she came.

"Leave me to fasten your boat, Miss Charteris," he said. "You have no time to lose in going home. It is nearly half-past eight now."

Ruth paused as she stood on the landing-place, leaving him in the boat from which he had just helped her to land. She held out her hand.

"You have been very kind to me," she said, gently, "and I am very grateful."

"If I have spared you one moment's pain by what I have done, you know that is reward enough for me," he said; and, after raising her hand for a second to his lips, he turned away, and busied himself in making the chains of the boats properly secure.

Ruth walked towards the house alone.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE plan arranged between Leonard and Stephen was successfully carried out. No one ever suspected any collusion between them, and the matter passed off without further trouble for Leonard than the "sharp reprimand" which Stephen had predicted.

Mrs. L'Estrange came home, as had been expected, about the end of September; and as by that time Leonard had received his half-year's allowance and his quarter's salary, as well as a considerable check from the publishers of the magazine in which he wrote, he had been able to repay the money lent to him by Stephen.

Leonard had been more ashamed of this last embarrassment than he had ever been of anything, and with some difficulty found courage to tell his aunt that he had now done all that she required of him. He could, however, tell her with truth that he was at length absolutely free from debt; and she, believing herself to have watched him carefully during the past year and a half, and to have known him thoroughly, acknowledged herself satisfied, and made arrangements immediately for his taking her name and becoming an adopted son. By her wish he left the bank at once, as she considered that different employment would now be more suitable for him.

He had obtained what he had so long earnestly desired, but he was not happy, and Mrs. L'Estrange saw it, and believed herself to know the reason. She was the first to speak of Ruth. She alluded to her former prohibition of any attempt to seek her. But when Leonard answered that *now* it would be useless, she could not contradict him, though she said that she thought he had better speak boldly and ascertain his fate without delay.

"I wish you to do this soon, Leonard," she said, "because, many months ago, for your sake, I exacted a promise from Mr. Powys that he, too, would be silent until *you* were free to speak. I cannot pretend not to see that it is his successful rivalry that you fear now, and therefore I tell you this. There was no engagement between you and Ruth, so that he had a perfect right to try his chance against you; and he has behaved so well and so generously that, even if he should succeed where you fail, I hope you will be able after a time to reconcile yourself to it."

Leonard did not answer, and Mrs. L'Estrange, though really very sorry for his disappointment, proceeded to tell him all that had passed between Stephen and herself in the winter.

"It is now for Ruth to decide between you, Leonard; and under circumstances so peculiar I think that even if you have little hope you ought to speak at once, or else avowedly give up the attempt to win her."

Leonard was silent. This was a revelation which made him more conscious of his own degradation than he had ever felt before. The contrast between Stephen's conduct and his own was an intolerable humiliation: it stung him into a momentary half-unconscious exclamation of misery and self-contempt which he could not retract. He was naturally impulsive, and in his present excitement he yielded as impetuously to the feeling which prompted him to seek relief in confession, as he had so often done before to the instinct of falsehood.

Mrs. L'Estrange learned the whole story of the last eighteen months in a few moments of uncontrolled shame and remorse; and once told it could not be recalled. The knowledge of the truth was a painful shock to her, undoubtedly, but she was kind and compassionate and reasonable. Her judgment was always able to assert itself, and she saw that the best thing to be done now was to profit by Leonard's confession to retain his confidence and confirm him in his good resolutions.

It was all inexpressibly painful to them both; but her true generosity of nature enabled her to be wise and kind, and to see what was really the best for every one. She resolved to let Leonard retain his present position, quite as much for the sake of Ruth and Stephen as for his own. She told him that they, and they only, should know of his confession, and that all the arrangements previously made should remain in force. It was obviously, now quite useless for him to think of Ruth, and his aunt decided on sending him away immediately to travel for some time, thinking that this plan was the most likely to spare pain

to all concerned. Till he was gone, she would say nothing to Stephen. Then she should tell him all.

As to seeing Ruth before he went, she told Leonard that he must choose for himself whether he would do so or not; and, with something of his habitual cowardice, he decided against it.

“He would write to her,—afterwards,” he said.

It was all settled very quickly. Leonard, now openly known to be Mrs. L'Estrange's acknowledged heir, left home ostensibly to travel,—intending probably to be away for twelve months and to go (according to modern fashion) round the world.

There was nothing unnatural or surprising in this; indeed, it was the most likely thing to have happened but for his well-known devotion to Ruth Charteris; and on that account, and that only, it gave rise to some little gossip; but, as it had been generally observed that she had lately been by no means encouraging in her reception of his marked attentions, it was assumed that she had refused him; and she was a good deal blamed for doing so.

When Leonard was gone, Mrs. L'Estrange spoke to Stephen, telling him that she now knew the whole truth from Leonard himself. She renewed her promise of making an ample provision for Ruth, but she said that she had ratified what had been virtually Stephen's own decision as to Leonard by allowing him to retain the position he had so unscrupulously obtained. Stephen coolly replied that he thought her quite right, for that Leonard was unquestionably the natural and suitable person to succeed her, and that there was every reason to believe that his career in the future would be quite satisfactory.

“There is a great deal of good in him,” he said, “and not much harm beyond want of strength to resist tempta-

tion. If he is prosperous and wealthy he will have few temptations of the kind so fatal to him, and his love of approbation and dread of censure will urge him to do what is expected of him; while if he were obliged to face disgrace and poverty he would probably sink lower and lower,—especially without the influence of friends to keep him up. Try to be hopeful about him,” Stephen added. “He is really strongly attached to you, and I believe will do his best to please you, and in doing that will grow out of his weakness, for he is certainly clever enough.”

“I shall do my best for him,” said Mrs. L'Estrange, with a sigh. “And when he comes home again I shall hope that you and Ruth may help him too. And now, Ruth as yet knows nothing of all this, and I leave it for you to tell her; for though you so unhesitatingly resigned Throstlethwaite to Leonard without consulting any one, I conclude you do not mean to make over Ruth to him in the same fashion, by withdrawing from the contest?”

That certainly was the last thing Stephen had any inclination to do, as he very soon proved. Since that expedition over the fells by night he had scarcely seen Ruth, for he doubted his own power of silence and self-control; but he went to Monksholme the day after he had seen Mrs. L'Estrange.

Ruth, who had wondered a good deal at his unusually long absence, and who knew very well by this time how important his coming was to her, was extremely glad to see him; and when, without telling her anything more than his own feelings for her, he asked her to marry him, her answer was given without a moment's hesitation. Without a thought as to fortune or position, she pledged herself to share his life and to trust hers to him.

Such a marriage for Ruth Charteris could not fail to ex-

cite a good deal of family commotion, and, though Mrs. L'Estrange's liberality made it impossible that any real difficulties should be raised, her parents were unquestionably disappointed, especially her mother, who could not even conceal that she was so. Mr. Charteris reconciled himself to it pretty quickly, for he liked Stephen, he believed that his daughter would be happy with him, and he knew her to be amply provided for. Agatha was thus the only person who really sympathized with her mother; but even she, though scornful and indignant at first, was soon able to treat it lightly and make the best of it.

"Ruth always *was* odd, mamma, you know! And, after all, this is a tolerably harmless form of eccentricity. All things considered, it is not so *very* bad a match for her,—especially in her own county, where her position is safe enough; and then—you know the Barringtons are none of them strong, and very possibly it may all come right as to Throstlethwaite in the end; though of course one mustn't say so."

Colonel Kennedy was entirely satisfied; and this gave Ruth more pleasure than anything, except Stephen's love for her, and Mrs. L'Estrange's warm-hearted motherly sympathy and comprehension.

With one opinion on her engagement, as reported by Edgar Charteris, who was at home, and who had imparted the news to Daniel, Ruth professed herself much gratified.

"Well, Mr. Edgar," Daniel had answered, "it's a kittle job is gettin' wed, anyway; but I'm thinkin' they'll both be less like to rue nor t' most o' folk!"

Thus it happened that only a few weeks after their meeting on the fells above Kilhowe in the early morning, Ruth and Stephen once more stood together among the rocks near the Lingdale Quarries; only this time it was

at a rational hour of the afternoon, and every one knew that they were out together.

Partly from Stephen and partly from Mrs. L'Estrange, Ruth by this time knew all that there was to know as to what had happened. She looked silently and rather sadly down upon Kilhowe, and Stephen watched her, but did not disturb her.

"Poor Leonard!" she said, at last. Then she added, looking up through a mist of tears, "How good you were to me that morning, Stephen!"

He laughed.

"True. And so disinterested! I was saying to myself all the while that my darling's heart was well worth waiting for and winning, and that it *should* be mine in time."

"It was yours from that day," she answered, softly; and then both were silent for a time.

Ruth spoke first.

"Mrs. L'Estrange says that you knew months ago all that she had settled about me; and——"

"And therefore, I suppose, you think that I have been fortune-hunting?" he replied, with a laugh.

"No. I am far too conceited to suppose anything so little flattering to myself," said Ruth, smiling. "I was only thinking that you knew that night at Kilhowe all that you were giving up when you consented to help Leonard out of the scrape."

"Yes. I knew it. But even then, Ruth, I could not help acting for *you* as I should have thought it right to act for myself. I sacrificed your certain succession to the property just as if it had been my own. I was sure you would have done the same in my place; and——"

"And you knew that it was practically the same thing, —that what you did for one was done for the other?"

"Even then I *hoped* it was so," he admitted. "And, at any rate, having to decide for you, I did what I thought it right to do."

They walked down to the lake again as they had done that morning, talking at first of Leonard, and afterwards of their own plans for their future life at Kester's Hill; and then they rowed back to Monksholme together.

"Give me an oar," Ruth said.

"No. Sit still," was the reply. "I have never forgotten the day when I had to submit so ignominiously to be useless and idle while you rowed me over to Carlsgill, and I have always longed to reverse our position then."

Ruth quietly obeyed, with a smile; but as she sat in the stern while he rowed her across the lake, she was silent and thoughtful. His allusion to that afternoon brought back to her mind other events which had happened on the same day. She thought of her row up from Throstlethwaite with Leonard, and her quarrel with him; of her first perception of the difference between their ways of thinking and feeling on important points, and the acute pain it had given her. Now, how little anything that Leonard could do or say could affect her peace, and how absolutely certain she was that, whatever troubles the future might bring, neither sorrow nor disappointment would ever be of Stephen's causing! He would only make troubles light, and pain easy to bear.

He asked her at last what she was thinking of so gravely, and she told him frankly more of the story of her early love for Leonard than he had yet heard. She did not pretend that she had not really loved him, though she made the difference of her present feeling evident enough to be sufficiently flattering.

"It was always a sense of anxiety and trouble then," she said, finally; "and now it is rest and peace. But I

do wish that it had never been at all. I wish *this* had been the *first* love of my life,—and——”

“Never mind, so long as it is the last!” was Stephen’s characteristic reply.

“Don’t *you* mind?” Ruth exclaimed. “I fancied, however certain you were that every trace of that love was gone, that you disliked its ever having been.”

“I’m no wiser than my neighbors, Ruth,” he answered, half laughing. “I don’t *dislike* the idea,—I *hate* it; but what on earth can be more foolish? I love you as you are, my darling; and has not everything you have done and thought and felt and suffered helped to make you what you are? Then what right have I, to whom you have given yourself now in your perfection, to resent any part of the past? No one ever is all that they *can* be, I suspect, without some suffering. Then ought I not rather to rejoice in yours? Only I hope that in future happiness will do as well for you.”

And surely Stephen was right. In her earlier girlhood, before responsibility and sorrow and the need for self-conquest had matured her powers of heart and mind, Ruth could not have been to him what she was now.

“The tree

Sucks kindlier nurture from a soil enriched
By its own fallen leaves; and man is made
In heart and spirit from deciduous hopes
And things that seem to perish.”

THE END.

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